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## Research Note

# Community, Collaboration and Crowdsourcing

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*Abstract: There is an increasing movement towards harnessing the power of communities and the collaborative work effort of large groups of people through crowdsourcing. CrisisCommons is a volunteer network of people innovating and working towards better technology and data use for disaster and crisis management. This group has illustrated the value creation and problem-solving capabilities that can come out of people organized around a common goal. Recent testimony to a subcommittee of the United States Senate by the co-founder of CrisisCommons has highlighted the role these collaborative networks can play in increasing resources and capabilities during times of crisis.*



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## Introduction

Without a doubt the generation of ideas, the availability of resources, and the general capability to solve problems increases as the number of people addressing the problem increases. Across sectors, the power of collaboration and crowdsourcing is being applied more frequently to a wider range of different and varying problems, from science and design to business and games. The idea of crowdsourcing is the practice of issuing an open call to a large, undefined group of people to work on solving, creating, or in other ways contribute to a project or problem.

In the face of some of the more recent devastating disasters, we have seen people rally together across the globe to join in the efforts to coordinate search and rescue, solve communication problems, reunite family, and serve the needs of responders and victims alike. The increasing ability to collaborate as diverse communities is due in part to expanding social media networks that have helped the “everyday” individual be more connected to each other, the disasters happening, and the power of collaboration. This is resulting in organizations and networks that are empowering businesses and individuals to make a difference.

## A Testimony to the Senate

A panel of experts came together in Washington, D.C. to testify to the senate subcommittee on [“Understanding the Power of Social Media as a Communications Tool in the Aftermath of Disasters”](#) on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011. The five groups represented were the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Arkansas Department of Emergency Management, the American Red Cross, Google, and CrisisCommons. One significance of this lineup is the fact that it is now being acknowledged that the approach to emergency and disaster management is evolving and growing to include more and more people and parties. Heather Blanchard, co-founder of CrisisCommons, summed up the work

CrisisCommons has been doing in the past few years, and how the prevalence of social media networks and citizen-generated content has been part of some of their most successful projects. Her testimony touched on the power of the work CrisisCommons does, and why it works. She states that because this community leverages technology through volunteers they “can direct technical capacity, harness open data and collaborative tools to help first responders and communities make sense from the deluge of information that occurs in a crisis”<sup>1</sup>.

And Ms. Blanchard put crowdsourcing into practice while preparing for her testimony to the members of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. She opened up her written testimony draft to the public, and asked for feedback and comments from the very people she was asked by the to represent – the CrisisCommons network. On the Google document alone (so not counting private messages), she had over 50 comments, suggestions, and questions tagged from the community. And in the final draft, the impact through changes is clear. None of the contributions were lengthy, but combined with each other the many thoughts built off each other and helped build a better end result.

## Emerging Collaborative Communities

CrisisCommons ([www.crisiscommons.org](http://www.crisiscommons.org)) is exemplifying this movement towards community collaboration and crowdsourcing. They are a network of volunteers who want to connect people with the technology and data that can be vital in times of crisis. The initial gathering was a diverse representation of people who all had the common goal of coming together for the exploring “opportunities to enhance the capabilities of citizens, communities and crisis response organizations capability and capacity to response to, recover from, mitigate

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<sup>1</sup> Blanchard, Heather. “Testimony of Heather Blanchard, Co Founder of CrisisCommons before the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery and Intergovernmental Affairs Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee”. *United States Senate*, 5 May 2011. Access 6 May 2011 from: [http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Files.View&FileStore\\_id=eed7c15c-0bd5-4079-9d79-ec283f644e72](http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Files.View&FileStore_id=eed7c15c-0bd5-4079-9d79-ec283f644e72)

against and prepare for crises.”<sup>2</sup> Their network has resulted in a wide variety of tools, trainings, data, and new approaches to the many challenges of how crises are managed. The foundational drive behind this community is the belief that “information at the right time and right place can help response authorities and citizens make better decisions especially in a crisis.”<sup>3</sup> The volunteers are not all experts in crisis and disaster management, but people from every walk of life. And they are not limited to a particular geography or country. The communities that are emerging all over the globe bring the variety of knowledge and abilities from every industry and field together. This is enabling solutions and approaches in ways that have never before been possible.

The foundation of Ushahini, an open-source crisis-mapping software, was the result of a network of volunteers, bloggers and citizen reporters.<sup>4</sup> Built to help Kenyans report and archive during the period of conflict in 2007-08, it evolved into a powerful tool during the Haitian earthquake of 2010. Many different groups have built upon the Ushahindi platform, and it is used for everything from tracking medical supplies and wildlife to organizing activists and enabling citizen journalism. And the platform continues to be used in new, innovating ways by organizations and communities.

## What Can Collaboration and Crowdsourcing Produce?

Out of the first CrisisCamp put together by Crisis Commons a partnership between Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, NASA and the World Bank was formed. The project was dubbed “Random Hacks of Kindness”<sup>5</sup>, and it is a website which brings software engineers and disaster risk management experts together to innovate solutions to global challenges. This is an example of the power of how bringing together

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<sup>2</sup> <http://crisiscommons.org/learn-more/our-story/>

<sup>3</sup> Blanchard.

<sup>4</sup> Heintelman, Jessica and Carol Waters. "Crowdsourcing Crisis Information in Disaster-Affected Haiti". *United States Institute of Peace*. Special Report 252, October 2010. Accessed 4 May 2011 from <http://www.usip.org/publications/crowdsourcing-crisis-information-in-disaster-affected-haiti>, pg 4.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.rhok.org/about/what-is-random-hacks-of-kindness/>

people with different areas of expertise can bring about ground-breaking designs for better addressing complex challenges. Out of this community, for example, there have been a number of creative “hacks” which have the potential to make it easier to deal with post-disaster needs. “[I’mOK!](#)” is an app that can use a mobile phone to broadcast messages to a predefined list of colleagues, friends and family through text message, email, or Facebook. This is just one example of the kind of outcome that emerges from collaborative and crowd-sourced efforts. Ushahindi, mentioned earlier, is another great example of tools and solutions that come from many people applying their talents in communities.

The benefits of collaboration and crowdsourcing are not limited to disaster response or humanitarian organizations. Businesses are catching on to the power of harnessing the interests and passions of the masses. For example, the X-Prize Foundation has structured competitions open to the public to propel innovation and push the boundaries of exploration. The results have been prizes focused private space shuttles, sequencing human genomes, and 100mpg automobiles. Amazon has rolled out Mechanical Turk, a framework for crowdsourcing micro-tasks to thousands of global, on-demand workers available around the clock.

## Conclusion

Whether the problem is how to manage relief supplies in a post-disaster environment, coordinate communication efforts in limited-infrastructure locations, or simply innovate the “next-big-thing”, the power of crowdsourcing is showing itself as a force to be reckoned with. Communities like CrisisCommons are connecting people with each other and making a difference to efforts across sectors and organizations. Organizations, governments, and businesses alike can all benefit from the value that comes from utilizing the contributions of people around the world.