

3rd International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC Davos 2010

PRESS RELEASE

Davos, Switzerland – Some 800 experts meeting for a week in this scenic Alpine town for a biannual International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC Davos 2010 are looking for high-tech answers to massive life-saving challenges.

Understandably, given the succession of gloomy IDRC Davos 2010 reports on recent natural and man-made disasters, the quest for Internet solutions among crisis managers seems obvious.

Yet the search may face some pitfalls, for as Sanjana Hattotuwa, a Sri Lankan advisor to the Colombo-based ICT4Peace, notes, there’s a dark side to the information revolution: it can be abused as a marketing tool for gaining donor money.

“The ethics of using the system for propaganda aims is real,” he says. “I have some huge concerns about this.”

Still, the crisis managers agree, Internet technology and mobile phones offer great global promise. Their networking potential could help nations cope with earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, fires, floods, droughts, famines, and now even the tragic pollution of oil-well spills.

In Africa, as Zurich-based IBM research manager Abdel Labbi points out, young people above all have seized on the mobile phone to create a hotbed of highly creative networking ideas. He believes such ingenuity and initiative can be tapped to help themselves and their neighbours in times of crisis.

“There’s an enormous potential for such people to work with and retrieve each other,” Dr. Labbi insists.

The Swiss researcher also sees immense promise in Internet technology for early-warning and response-planning systems. He predicts new breakthroughs in weather forecasting and what he calls “now-casting” – local reporting on weather threats in real time.

“Each year 7,000 people are killed due to extreme weather,” he says. “It’s a ‘silent disaster’ because it can be happen with low frequency and high severity or high frequency and low severity. Either way it’s not insignificant.”

Meanwhile, a high-ranking United Nations official has plans underway for a global weather-related network of risk tracking and registering observatories with Internet technology.

The official, Nepal-born Carlos Villacis, who coordinates the global risk identification office (GRIP) within the Geneva-based United Nations Development Programme, says there’s no system in place yet, but he sees it as a vital tool in preparing for hurricanes, cyclones, tornados, and tropical storms.

However, a Cameroon invitee to the IDRC gathering reports that his country opened such a disaster prevention observatory in 2003, though it has not yet been linked to an envisioned West African network.

At the strictly personal level, a Stanford University engineer, Professor Haresh Shah, foresees a breakthrough with the help of micro-credit insurance policies. These too would be enabled though high-tech innovation.

“You’d have to sign an underwriting form, and you’d get a premium,” Shah says. “You can’t write an insurance policy with the conventional underwriting system. You’d have to eliminate that. But what if the [inexpensive] payment can be cashed in by mobile phone? This enables you to buy a card and get a free medical check-up with a swipe of the card. It’s technology enabling something that has been impossible up to now.”

The ICT4Peace Foundation advisor Hattotuwa shares Shah’s enthusiasm for such ideas.

“This is life-saving technology,” he says. “It’s critical stuff!”

Lyn Shepard, Conference Journalist

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