

# TOWARD A CREDIBLE CROWD SOURCING SYSTEM FOR PREVENTION

## *Reflections for Practice*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This report is an outcome of a one-day reflection and brainstorming session organized within the auspices of GPPAC's Action Learning – Preventive Action Programme in collaboration with partners.

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## BACKGROUND

*Social change is actually driven not by technologies but by ordinary people being able to exert an authority over their own experience and, through common actions, developing the courage to determine their own destiny.*<sup>4</sup>

Information plays a central role in the field of conflict prevention and peace building. If accessed on time, well verified, analysed and shared to the right stakeholders, it has the potential to shape preventive actions while also guiding the interventions of those seeking to contribute to positive change in conflict and conflict prone contexts. Traditionally, systematic conflict analysis has been the primary avenue through which conflict dynamics are diagnosed and information made available for policy makers, civil society organizations (CSOs) and other stakeholders to intervene in conflict areas. It is agreed that systematic conflict analysis however places emphasis on long term unpacking of structural sources of conflicts, with analysis and information flows requiring long time investments.

In some cases conflict analysis remains a costly undertaking both in time and resources. Requiring sufficient time, traditional analysis hinges on planning that does not always meet the demands of fast changing operational conflicts; like those surrounding elections and other political transition phases. The election violence in Kenya, Ivory Coast, Guinea and the pre-referendum violence in transitional areas of Sudan, allude to the need for a complementary conflict information generation approach to strengthen traditional conflict analysis mechanisms and shape timely response mechanisms. In addition, alternative communication mechanisms to channel information and share incidents are needed to ensure rapid response and intervention.

### CROWDSOURCING (CS)

Crowdsourcing (CS) is increasingly being used as an alternative system to the traditional mechanisms of generating conflict information to shape response and peace building interventions. Through gathering information from a number of newer and widely used systems – such as social media communication ecosystems, emails and mobile phone technology – CS acts a hub for information generated voluntarily and anonymously. Pioneered by the works of Ushahidi and others in the field of crisis mapping, CS has played a central role in crisis awareness and elections monitoring. *The question that remains to be answered and explored further is the role that crowdsourcing can play in anticipating conflict and generating information that can shape and inform the prevention of the more operational violence.*

On 27<sup>th</sup> June 2011, a multi-stakeholder brainstorming session was convened by GPPAC in collaboration with other partners to reflect on the conditions under which credible crowdsourcing for prevention (CCS4P) can be utilized in conflict-prone areas to inform violence prevention interventions and peace building efforts. This one day round table brought together a small team of representatives from CSOs from East, South and West Africa, the UN, and the government of Kenya. This report is therefore presented in the form of key reflections from the meeting with the intention to further develop a background document that will inform field-testing in selected countries. From this exercise a full report will be developed on the findings with the goal of informing further preventive interventions throughout Africa and beyond.

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<sup>4</sup> Firoze Manji (Manji, F. (2008) 'Mobile activism, mobile hype', Gender and Media Diversity Journal, no. 4, January, pp 125-32

## **TOWARDS CREDIBLE CROWDSOURCING FOR PREVENTION**

Mobilizing information to inform early warning and response is a core benefit of crowdsourcing methods. Within the context of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, credible information (in this case information that is verifiable, analyzed and trust-worthy) becomes a core aspect of prevention. This is information that can be acted upon and that can lead to prevention rather than exacerbating conflict and violence. There have been examples in the field where information that is not well verified or validated has led to violence, with very little possibilities of shaping prevention efforts. During the June 27<sup>th</sup> meeting, reflections focused on the aspect of credibility, while also seeking to ensure that crowdsourcing for prevention is not just about information gathering, but also for prevention and action.

While crowdsourcing has played a central role in other fields, for example crisis management and humanitarian action, there is need for caution and proper reflection when seeking to apply the same within the field of violence prevention and peacebuilding. A key aspect to be considered if crowdsourcing is to contribute meaningfully to the field of violence prevention is credibility of the information and credibility of the process. Credibility in this case becomes an end in itself, but also a process, which ought to be believed, plausible and verifiable. The legitimacy in the process, meaning that it is context specific and not a straight jacket meant to be a one-size fits all, suggests rather a loose spectrum that can be contextualized. Credibility of information also implies that the information that is generated is properly analysed and verified by various key stakeholders and rendered plausible for action. Finally, that credibility of a process is also determined by the nature of the response, which again implicates the stakeholders involved and their roles. The following brief sections attempt to discuss some of these issues in greater detail and provide food for thought for further discussion and development.

### **Role of Multi-Stakeholders**

From the perspective of preventive action, the role of multiple stakeholders cannot be underestimated. It is plausible to argue that preventive action is a sum total of activities, interventions and responses by various stakeholders/actors within a given context. For example, there is a very specific role to be played by civil society organizations, the UN, government, media, and regional bodies, amongst others. This therefore implies that these stakeholders/actors have a central role to play in the generation of conflict information, verification, analysis and response.

For example, civil society groups might play a key role in generating 'grassroots' information depending on their outreach and area of cover. A national NGO might have a broad outlook on one hand, while a CBO might give a more localized perspective that is indeed relevant depending on the conflict requiring attention. Government institutions for example, Provincial administration, intelligence or Ministry of Interior, might on the other hand have the legitimacy and ability to respond to conflict early warning generated through crowdsourced mechanisms. Engaging these government institutions in a collaborative manner to mobilize information provides the much-needed legitimacy to the process as well as empowering legitimate institutions the space for response to the warnings. Another example touches on the role and capacity of the UN and other international organizations. While funding is a key consideration, the UN has through its mandate established extremely useful relationships with governments. Engaging with and collaborating with the UN in

processes geared towards prevention provides most conflict-prone contexts an opportunity to access spaces for decision-making and authority.

The abovementioned examples provide a simple yet important dynamic of stakeholder involvement that contributes to the credibility of information generated and the processes set in motion. The responsible stakeholders within any CS system therefore hold a very powerful tool if implemented correctly. The realization of this leads to the need to develop clear accountability structures as well as response mechanisms. What is still important is to determine the viability to domesticate these discussions based upon on the country context. In some countries, CSOs and the public enjoy a relatively good relationship with governments, while in others like Eritrea and Ethiopia for example, CSO spaces to engage is limited and free media does not exist. In these cases if government were to initiate or even be involved in the CS process how would they be deemed credible by the public and international community?

#### **Box 1: Kenya's Conflict Early Warning System**

The Kenya National Steering Committee for Peace Building and Conflict Management is also host to Kenya's Conflict Early Warning System. This system brings together multiple stakeholders who play different roles in ensuring that the system generates warnings, but also leads to early and timely response. This system can be well referred to as a hybrid system where CSOs, the Kenya Government represented by the Provincial administration and Office of the President, UNDP, bilateral donors for example USAID and others converge and collaborate.

**SOURCE:** Peter Mwamachi, (Program Officer, NSC) Presenting on Kenya Early Warning System during the Credible Crowdsourcing Roundtable, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2011

#### **Role of Field Monitors**

Irrespective of the name used, field monitors or conflict monitors play a central role in ensuring that information that is generated is reliable and credible. In most cases they are locally embedded, meaning that they belong to those specific communities and therefore bring in an aspect of legitimacy to the process. Generating information and relaying it to the correct stakeholders requires trust-building measures – both within the community they work and with those that they share the information with. One way of doing this within the context of conflict prevention is engaging field monitors who are also gatekeepers with good reputation. Trust building and credibility therefore goes hand in hand and is vital to the success of such a program. Efficient and credible monitoring systems rely heavily upon reliable field monitors. These monitors provide a dual role, especially in areas with poor access to information sharing tools, they are an intermediary for the people to the CCS4P as well as an on-the ground source to verify information received to the CCS4P. Monitors report through an information tool to the CCS4P on a regular basis and in extraordinary cases. Furthermore, they are the eyes and ears in a community and can be called upon to verify situations.

## Box 2: Key Considerations when selecting Field Monitors

**Identity:** Are they locally embedded? There is always a danger when conflict or field monitors are external individuals.

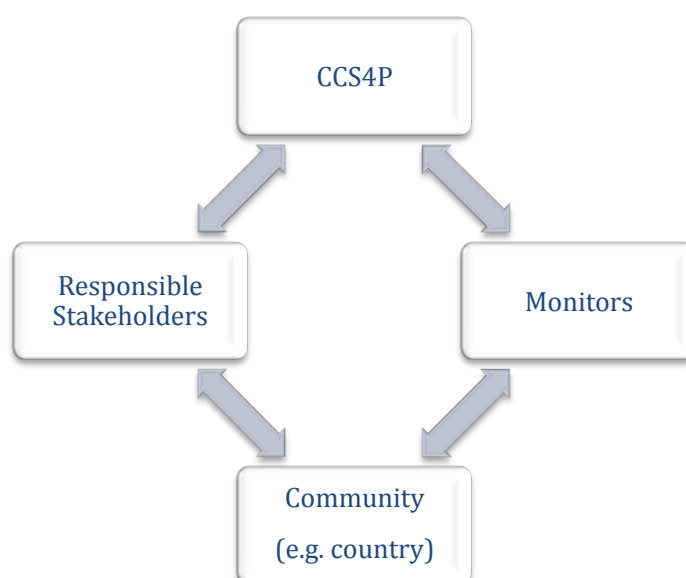
**Legitimacy and Reputation:** Within the context of conflict prevention, legitimacy and reputation does play a central role. On one hand, you do need an individual who brings legitimacy to the process. She or he is known to be honest, not biased (politically, ethnically or otherwise), but also with a good reputation.

**Trustworthy:** All these are aspects that are difficult to measure in an individual, but the role of multiple stakeholders, networks and partnerships become important. How do you know that an individual is trust worthy? One can use recommendations from credible institutions for example NGOs, UN, Government institutions or the community itself. Individuals who can be trusted at local level, will be able to play an important role in mobilizing information, verifying and can be trusted to relaying it without altering or misrepresenting it.

**Incentives:** In some cases, field monitors have been provided with incentives. This could be through remunerations, allowances or in some cases salaries. In such cases, accountability is ensured. The flip side to this is that such incentive mechanisms can also compromise the legitimacy of the process and raise questions about the credibility of the process.

**SOURCE:** Plenary Discussions: Credible Crowdsourcing Roundtable, 27<sup>th</sup> June, 2011

**Figure 1:** Relationship between Key Stakeholder, Field Monitors and the Community at large



### Context Specific System

A credible system should be appropriately suited to the needs and reality of the country it is to be implemented in. And it must take into account the multiple factors and stakeholders within and surrounding the state of the country. In an ideal scenario it should be developed, implemented and owned in partnership with several stakeholders that can contribute their expertise and roles where necessary. Box 3 below briefly presents key aspects for consideration which may vary from country to country and yet crucial when pursuing credibility of process.

### **Box 3: Factors that are Context Specific**

**The State of the Government:** Can government be involved or will it jeopardize the credibility of the credibility of the program? If they can be involved how much information should they be privy to?

**Primary Stakeholders:** Who are the primary stakeholders? What is the credibility and responsibility of each of these stakeholders in light of the current state of the nation? Are there competing and conflicting interests amongst these stakeholders? What role does each stakeholder fulfill? Who has access to what information? And, how do you create cohesion and information sharing amongst these groups and still ensure real-time information sharing and rapid response?

**Role of the International Community:** How should UN, AU, RIGOs and INGOs be involved? What is their responsibility in the current state of the nation? What can they contribute?

**Telecommunications Infrastructure:** What is the extent of the telecommunications industry in the country? Does the government regulate it? Who are the providers and what is the coverage?

**Credible Media:** Is the media considered free and fair? What role should the media play? How much information should be given to them? How will they disseminate this information for prevention purposes? Who is using what kind of media (for example Radio, Newspapers, Internet, etc)?

**Incorporating Traditional Methods of Communication and Conflict Resolution:** What are the current traditional structures at the grassroots? What roles can chiefs, elders, community leaders play?

**Entry Point and Outreach:** Who will be the initiator – or what is the entry point of the system? Is Government or CSO more reliable? Who will oversee the outreach and promotion of the system all the way down to the grassroots level?

**SOURCE:** Plenary Discussions: Credible Crowdsourcing Roundtable, 27<sup>th</sup> June, 2011

### **Accessibility: How to Access the Masses**

Having monitors in place is one thing, but accessing large masses of people to mobilize and generate information is another. The Internet is one large source for information gathering and sharing. The truth is, it remains a luxury in the urban areas in Africa – and only a small percentage of those in the urban areas have consistent access to it. The CCS4P system must consider that only a small percentage of users will be able to respond using Twitter, Facebook and email. However, cell phone usage in Africa is growing almost twice as fast as any other region in the world. It has jumped from 63 million users two years ago to 152 million today. But the majority of cell phones in Africa are pre-2003 models. Therefore there is an urgent need for low-end, simple, appropriate technology solutions, which are easy to obtain, affordable, and require as little technical expertise as possible. CCS4P tools which link with both newer and older models of cell phones must be just as easy to obtain and affordable to use. Outreach strategies to engage communities in urban and rural areas must be assessed as these two areas can vary greatly in their communication and information approaches.

This brings the discussion to the aspect of communication infrastructure within each country. If cell phone coverage is limited, especially in rural areas, then other means and tools for communicating must be explored. The whole crux of crowdsourcing is that information should be easily mobilized and quickly relied upon. This therefore implies that traditional modes of generating and sharing information might slow the response processes, which in some cases do require urgency given the short interface between conflict and its escalation to violence. The National Steering Committee on Peace Building and Conflict management based in Kenya, for example, have found an alternate to cell phones, they depend on High

Frequency Radios (HFR) in rural and remote areas to open up communication for those that would not normally have access to other communications tools. Using HFR compensates for those regions where mobile network connections are not accessible. Simplicity of such a system will determine the category of people able to access and share information. Furthermore, in most cases, conflict-prone areas still depict high levels of illiteracy. This therefore brings the dilemma of a way of communication for those that cannot read or write, but also language relevant so that those incapable of communicating in the universal languages like English, French, Arabic can still be able to be participate in the process.

**Box 4: Freedom Fone Tries to Beat the Illiteracy and Infrastructure Barrier in Zimbabwe**

Freedom Fone makes it easy to build interactive, two-way, phone based information services using interactive audio voice menus, voice messages, SMS and polls. The DIY platform is accessible, user-friendly, low-cost, global and does not require Internet access for users and callers alike. It takes advantage of audio to address language and literacy barriers when reaching out to the millions of people living on the margins of the information society.<sup>5</sup>

**SOURCE:** [www.freedomfone.org](http://www.freedomfone.org)

While discussing the question of field monitors, we raised the issue of incentive structures. This has been a central concern especially when the crowd mobilizing and generating information for prevention has to incur communication costs on either the caller or receiver end. The costs of cell phone usage including calls and SMS' can be a hindrance to individuals living within extreme poverty circumstances. Such costs therefore need to be considered when creating information tools.

**Box 5: WANEP Nigeria Seeks to address to Cost Issue**

In an attempt to address some of the concerns related to information costs, WANEP Nigeria's Conflict Early Warning System, which also employs crowd sourced information, has secured postpaid mobile phones for monitors, specially configured and networked with crisis lines. In this case the field monitors are able to communicate with the National Secretariat at any time of the day or night, without the cost concerns. In addition to this, a token of appreciation of USD 23 is paid to the monitors on a monthly basis to offset their communications costs.

**SOURCE:** Ifeanyi Okechukwu, presenting WANEP Nigeria' NEWS, 27<sup>th</sup> June, 2011

In more poverty stricken areas many families and communities rely on communal phones. How this affects information sharing has yet to be known, but it could hinder the volunteering of information regarding sensitive situations. In addition, gender dimensions must be considered as in some communities the head of the household, often a man, controls the household phone. In these cases, how can information sharing and sensitive tools be developed that allow women to safely and anonymously share information? Another dimension is battery life. In most rural parts of Africa and other developing contexts, electricity and other sources of energy are not highly available. It is there important that technologies that are generated are triangulated to ensure flow, but also accessibility.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.freedomfone.org](http://www.freedomfone.org)

#### **Box 6: Accessibility Considerations**

- Urban and rural communication tools
- Outreach strategies for different areas and people
- Alternative communication infrastructure and technology depending on the available outreach
- Literacy and illiteracy differentials
- The question of language
- Costs
- Gender dimension and roles within information sharing

**SOURCE:** Credible Crowdsourcing for Prevention Round Table, 2011

#### **Verifying Conflict-Information**

Conflicts are not neutral processes. They represent spaces where competing and at times conflicting interests are advanced and protected. It is therefore plausible to argue that violence (destructive conflict) does occur once these competing interests can no longer be negotiated or compromised. Without proper, legitimate mechanisms for dialogue, violence becomes one destructive choice of expressing views, but also advancing interests. Conflict information therefore becomes a crucial element in any preventive effort. We have been discussing the various elements of ensuring that information is credible and that the process of collecting it is legitimate. In this sub-section, we bring to the table a notion of verifying this information before it can shape off-line activities.

Crowdsourcing is a useful method for consolidating perspectives from the streets, some of which can be referred to as rumors. These perspectives have to be verified, analyzed and presented to responsible stakeholders and the public for action. To do this, modern technologies and innovative information ecosystems provide opportunities for safe-verification of raw data before it is made available for public consumption. This is of course to support and compliment the off-line verification efforts by conflict monitors and others.

#### **Box 7: The Peace Portal ([www.peaceportal.org](http://www.peaceportal.org)) and Existing Online Possibilities**

The Peace Portal is an initiative of the GPPAC Foundation, supported by the Netherlands Ministry of Economic Affairs and the City of The Hague, with the mission to share and integrate information leading to action aimed at preventing conflict and building peace. The Peace Portal offers a neutral on-line platform open to everybody and serves the peace building community. Hence, it is a platform where multiple stakeholders can verify collected information as well as initiate dialogue around sensitive information

On the Peace Portal, online communities are given space for information verification and multiple stakeholder dialogue which can be completely open (accessible for everyone), restricted (requiring access) or completely closed (private). Behind the Peace Portal is GPPAC – a global CSO Network that seeks to contribute towards the prevention of violence. This offers a credible network providing spaces for verification and important regional gate keepers for monitoring and global advocacy and exchange

**SOURCE:** Presentation by Vicky Carreras, Peace Portal Manager at the CCS4P Round Table, 2011

## **Mobilizing Response and Action**

Finally and most importantly is the aspect of response and timely action. In this brief outline, we have reflected on some of the key considerations and conditions under which crowdsourcing can play a role in violence prevention. We argue that generating information is just one aspect of violence prevention, though an important and increasingly vital one. It is argued that being able to have an early warning system where the public or a crowd can indeed generate information based on any given sets of indicators creates greater opportunity for prevention of conflict and violence. Those planning to engage in activities that might lead to violence can therefore be deterred by the mere fact that such a system exists. Secondly, raising awareness is a key aspect of prevention which many times does not receive much attention. When people are made aware of the potentials of violence or conflict, through well-verified information, then behavior can be transformed to the positive. A core aspect of response however, and which we have spoken about at the beginning of this brief, is the role of multiple stakeholders in mobilizing response and forging action based on the various warnings generated through crowd sourced information.

## **CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD**

It is obvious from the above discourse that multiple factors and layers within those factors exist when developing an early warning system with a focus on credible crowdsourcing. Two vital challenges when developing such a strategy include the accessibility of information flows and the extent and scope of the actors involved. The basis for this brief and the forthcoming report will be focused on developing strategy and will most likely generate even more questions around the role that crowdsourcing can play in anticipating conflict and collating information that can shape and inform the prevention of violence. The result from this background report will thus lead to its practical application in field exercises throughout various selected countries most specifically related to upcoming elections and curbing election violence. The result will be an analysis of the challenges and opportunities that exist within CCS4P and to develop a standard for the use of such a tool in early warning and prevention of conflict.

As more and more stakeholders, specifically in the international community, are keen to understand the opportunities that exist within current technology for conflict prevention and information, it is important that we examine its role and set a precedent for its use in order to contribute to the field of conflict prevention. Even more so, stakeholders who were involved in conflict early warning systems prior to technology have great knowledge in the idiosyncrasies in each country and the field and therefore cannot be disregarded but must be involved in the development of CCS4P as it is a tool to further their work and not replace it.

The role of this particular project is not just to analyze theories of intervention but to actually test the use of technology, specifically crowdsourcing, in the field for prevention. It is upon this foundation that we will seek to work quickly and rigorously in the coming months to build upon the meeting held on the 27 June 2011 in Nairobi. The next steps will include developing the necessary tools as we engage in pilots around CCS4P around possible election and other related violent conflicts in DRC, Zimbabwe, Liberia and Kenya. It is through doing, that key lessons on how such modern technologies can contribute to strengthening peace building and conflict prevention efforts can be developed.

**ANNEX 1: List of Participants**

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