# CRISIS RESPONSE

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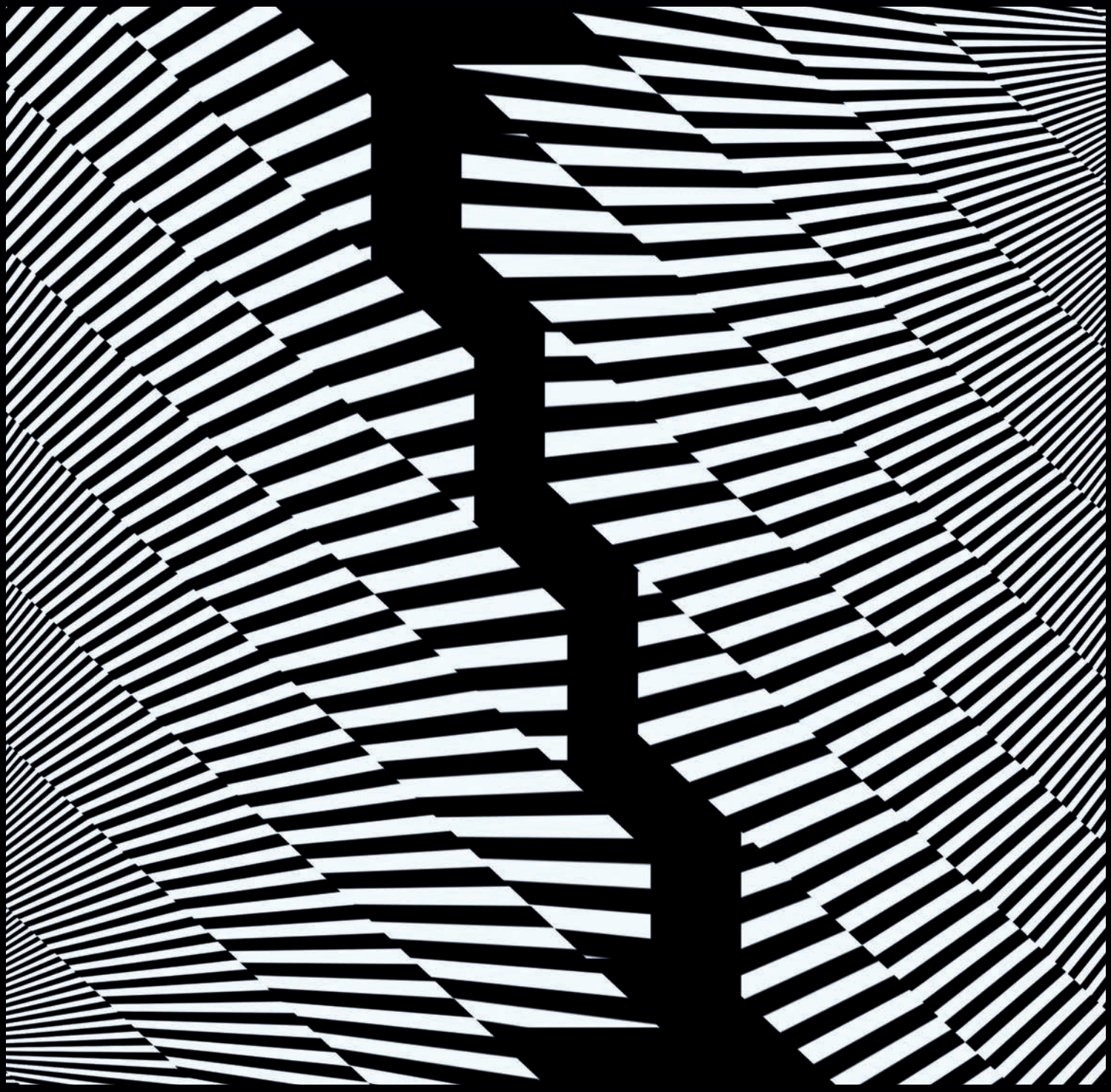

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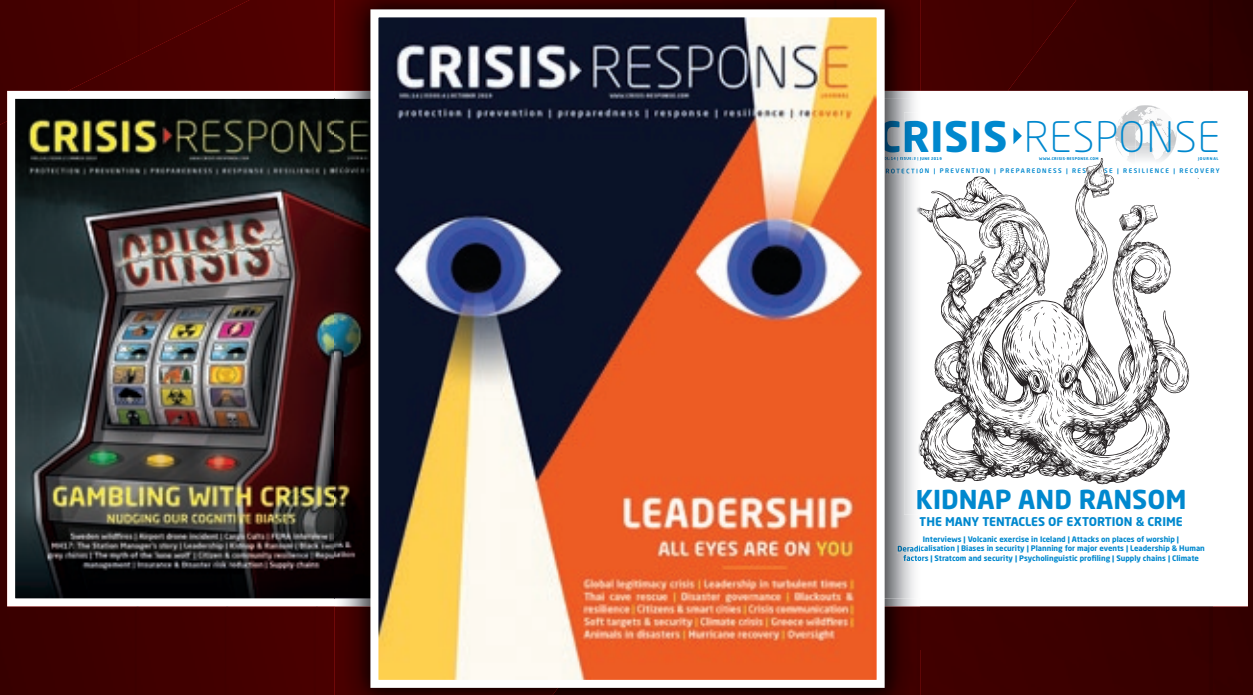


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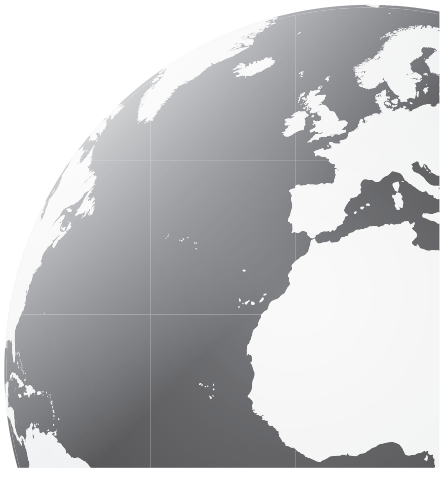



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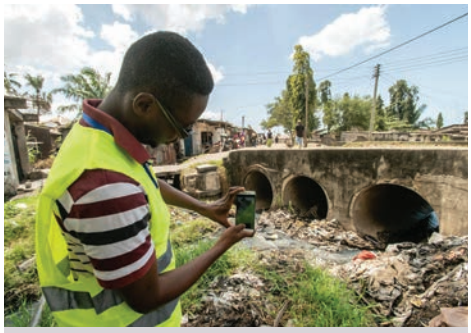


HOT | Chris Morgan

# comment

**"Today's biggest problems** defy simple, short-sighted solutions," commented Ambassador (Ret) David Carden in the *South China Post* on February 19. Although Carden was referring to the global response in the face of Covid-19, his thoughts on complex adaptive systems are applicable to the whole gamut of crisis risks.

On p4 of this edition of *CRJ*, we discuss the *Global Risks Report 2020*, which forecasts a year of increased domestic and international divisions. It says: "Systems-level thinking is required to confront looming geopolitical and environmental risks and threats that may otherwise fall under the radar." On p12 Michele Wucker points to the need for greater systems-level thinking when considering far reaching global challenges such as climate.

Wucker also highlights the benefits in terms of resilience in societies where people do not just consider themselves as individuals, but as part of a larger group.

"Thinking holistically is part of what transformation research is all about. We can't all be running around doing our own thing individually," notes Professor Wilson of Ohio State's School of Environmental and Natural Resources, in a call for less focus on individuals and more work to inspire collective action in preparedness for climate threats (p4).

As Amy Pope says on p16: "No single government, or even a multilateral institution, is equipped to respond to any major disaster alone. In a world where major governments are choosing their own countries first, we are fighting disasters with one arm tied behind our backs."

Pope continues: "Ultimately, we need to rethink the way that societies engage collectively. In the absence of leadership from governments, there is an opportunity for corporations, non-governmental actors and individuals to influence the debate, push for reform, build coalitions and fill the gaps..."

So in this fractured landscape, who is stepping in to fill the yawning gap in trust and governance? Interestingly, the *2020 Edelman Trust Barometer* (p6) notes that: "Business has leapt into the void left by populist and partisan government." Other factors in achieving a holistic, co-operative approach include cognitive diversity (p8), cultural understanding (p74), citizens themselves (p78) and spontaneous volunteers (p80).

Fractures can be healed. Admittedly, this can be a painful process, but it does appear that a fundamental change in thinking is now imperative. We *all* have a role to play in this.

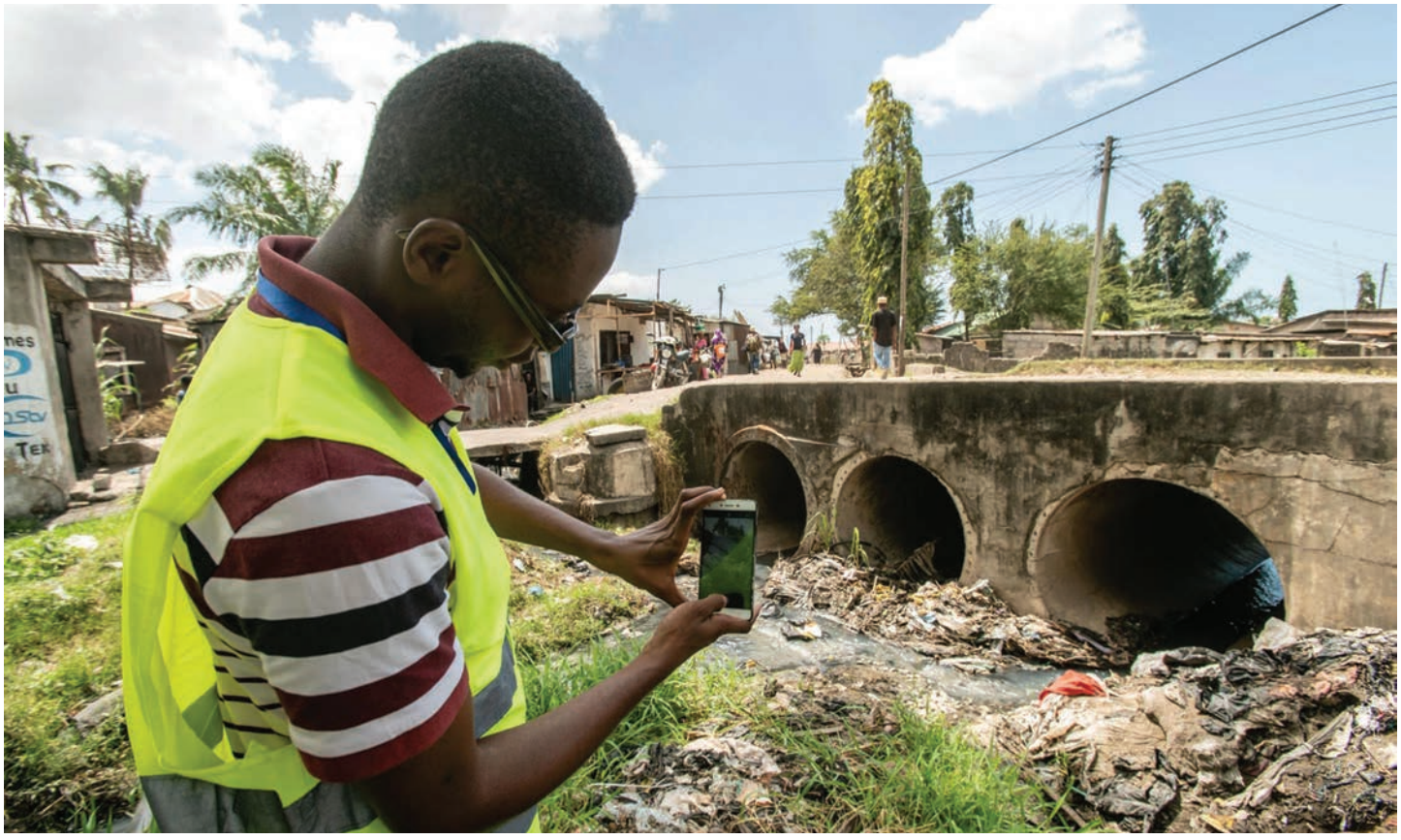
# Crisis mapping: Regionalise,

Although formal humanitarian entities continue to be the mainstay of crisis efforts, they are no longer the sole players in the humanitarian sphere and it is increasingly important that we understand the relationship between digital volunteers and the formal humanitarian sector, says **Doug Specht**

Responses to humanitarian crises are no longer only undertaken by professional agencies and NGOs. The advent of the Internet and the plethora of emerging digital tools that have flooded the market in recent years now actively encourage more people to engage in crisis response. Through collecting data from geotagged digital photos, aid requests posted on Twitter, aerial imagery, Facebook posts, SMS messages and other digital sources, volunteers are mobilising to create crowdsourced crisis maps and other data sets that offer unprecedented depictions of communities' needs in a crisis.

The Internet has also opened up a space for the general population to volunteer to sift, sort and map data that could help to improve the speed and efficiency of response. With more people being encouraged to throw their support and time into crisis response via digital tools, the data landscape in moments of crisis has become increasingly complex, difficult to manage and can even hinder rescue or aid efforts. Research examines the complexities created by this new mode of crisis mapping and explores how professional humanitarian organisations can utilise and benefit from these changes.

The concept of crowdsourced crisis mapping is normally defined as the provision of services by an international and/or online community, which gathers, analyses and maps critical information related to disaster-affected populations. Online digital responders often work as part of what are termed Volunteer and Technical Communities, offering free technical services during and outside of humanitarian activations. Within the humanitarian sector, crowdsourced mapping has arguably



*A mapper building a pre-emptive map to reduce flooding risks in Dar es Salaam*

HOT | Chris Morgan | World Bank

# prepare and research

revolutionised the way in which crisis response is perceived, particularly through its ability to enable disaster-affected communities to define the way in which they receive help. If humanitarian organisations historically relied solely on field responders' assessments to calculate the relief needs of affected communities, the Internet has now given voice to those in need, allowing them to project their requirements into a global workforce of digital responders.

The 2010 Haiti earthquake brought the process of crowdsourced crisis mapping to the attention of the world (see *CRJ* 8:1). Following the earthquake, many Haitians took to social media to issue pleas for help. Around the world, thousands of volunteers mobilised to aggregate, translate and plot these requests on maps – an effort largely co-ordinated by the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team and Ushahidi, a crowdsourced mapping platform, using OpenStreetMap.

Since then, the number of volunteers and amounts of data collected have continued to grow – 230,000 tweets were posted within two days of Typhoon Haiyan hitting the Philippines in 2013, and rapid data sifting meant volunteers could highlight and map key areas of destruction, potentially saving many more lives.

While these crowdsourced maps and datasets are seen by many as useful, providing fresher and more accurate information, some have criticised them for having limited actionable outcomes. Such concerns, coupled with the deluge of data that is produced, means that these maps are often under-utilised, or even ignored by aid organisations and rescue operations. However, new research carried out by Amelia Hunt and myself has shown that the number of volunteers engaging in moments of crisis is increasing, as is the amount of data being produced. Collective action is forming, and at times becoming more formalised. This has already altered the humanitarian landscape, and is not going to disappear in the near future. While formal humanitarian entities continue to be the mainstay of crisis efforts, they are no longer the sole players in the humanitarian sphere and it is increasingly important that we understand the relationship between digital volunteers and the formal humanitarian sector.

Undertaking a series of high-level interviews and examining 51 deployments over six years, our research calls for a three-pronged approach when working across the professional and volunteer communities in the digital age: Regionalise; prepare; and research. While these concepts have long been at the core of much humanitarian work, it is important to revisit and recontextualise these terms and modes of working in order to find better ways of working with volunteers before and during a crisis, enabling better utilisation of crowdsourced crisis maps and other data sets.

Problems with using crowdsourced maps are as old as the practice itself. The wealth of information created by local Haitian communities in 2010 was mostly lost because the majority of humanitarian organisations were not in a position to use the data. Five years later, something similar happened when another earthquake struck Nepal, again much of the volunteer-gathered data and mapping was ignored or unused by formal humanitarian responders. This led to many remote responders feeling disheartened that their efforts were not better received.

Data deluge is a major issue facing the humanitarian sector. More data gives the potential for more targeted response plans, but without adequate filtering and processing, it becomes an extra burden. Our research found that in acute emergencies, a lack of time to assess data leads to new and untested data sources – such as crowdsourced maps – being dismissed.

## Deep-set notions

Concerns have also been raised over the capabilities and legal standing of volunteers working remotely to collect and map data. Deep-set notions of what is 'good' data also affect expectations surrounding the data they are willing to accept – this is often based on past experiences or on data presented by what are seen as 'reliable' humanitarian 'brands'.

There is great potential for improving humanitarian systems through crowdsourced data and maps. Thus, it is vital to find ways forward. Regionalisation, preparation and research work together to use a research informed approach to highlight areas of risk.

Once research has established that a region is 'at risk', a process of preparedness is required. Here, the data collection begins before a crisis takes hold. Data is presented to humanitarian organisations while they have time to examine and cross check it, building trust between volunteer communities and the formal sector as well as giving a base level of information. Such work is already being carried out by projects such as Missing Maps and Humanitarian OpenStreetMap. Regionalising builds local networks of data collectors and validators ahead of a crisis. Finally, it would be necessary to upskill local communities with digital skills or establish local digital humanitarian hubs, which could, in turn, act as sub-sets of organisations such as the Digital Humanitarian Network.

However, preparedness work is difficult. Even when the right area is selected, resources, both financial and voluntary, are always more drawn towards moments of crisis, and the lack of international media focusing on communities at risk diminishes the sense of urgency to support preparedness efforts.

Early crowdsourced mapping efforts, with pre-mapped access routes and medical facilities, could save money as well as lives.

In summary, the Internet has given communities a new platform to voice their needs in times of crises. But without planning, this extra data risks being lost or unused in moments of acute crisis.

Perhaps we need to reimagine crisis maps as 'pre-crisis maps' or 'dormant crisis maps', preparing them early so they can be more readily integrated into the humanitarian response as legitimate and valid interventions. CRJ

## Source

*Hunt A, Specht D (2019):* Crowdsourced mapping in crisis zones: collaboration, organisation and impact, International Journal of Humanitarian Action *4:1.*

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