The Exchange

Date

Tuesday 14th July 2009

Title of session

Workshop: The use of GI in response to man-made and natural disasters

Name of presenter/chair

Ian Holt, MapAction - Chair

Name of rapporteurs

Luke Hampson & Emily Dover

Ian Holt provided a useful insight in to MapAction. MapAction is an organisation that works in disaster zones providing frequently updated situation maps showing where relief help is most urgently needed. In a humanitarian crisis, relief agencies need rapid answers to questions about where the greatest needs are and where the gaps are that need to be filled.

Ian went on to discuss the situations where MapAction has assisted in response to natural disasters. He explained that Hurricane Katrina illustrated the importance of the quality of information in such instances. The Bam Earthquake was one of the first natural disasters to which MapAction were deployed as a team. The only mapping that was available when they arrived was a basic map that had been drawn from a tourist brochure. There was a need to allow the disaster recovery teams to plot data and make decisions and MapAction assisted greatly in this instance.

MapAction only have 3 paid staff and rely upon approximately 40 deployable GIS professionals who are volunteers. They receive financial backing from the UK Department for International Development and Prince Harry also provides support.

Everyone involved with the charity are geared up to deploy rapidly, their remit is to help out in the first week following a natural disaster; any longer term assistance is supplied by the UN. They also engage in capacity building projects that look to the longer term capacity of countries around the world being able to help themselves in the future.

MapAction's role in response to sudden disasters is to react quickly and to ensure that they are amongst the first people to arrive to help in such situations. MapAction identify who can provide them with data – for example as a first port of call they may

contact the national mapping agency of the affected area. They then build and alter this base mapping by collecting local intelligence about the disaster area.

A typical example of an exercise that MapAction had to undertake was where a bridge had been destroyed in a disaster zone and had become unusable. They added this information to the base mapping and provided it to the individuals that required it.

MapAction often supply paper copies of the maps to the teams that are working in the disaster zone to aid them with their operations. Mapping information on what roads are accessible for certain vehicles is extremely useful intelligence in a disaster situation. This is usually combined with photographs and additional information to assist.

Ian Holt confirmed that they frequently contact the Defence Geographic Centre for any information that they may hold of a disaster area and the session was rounded off with a few questions and answers from the group.

Questions/Comments	Answers
James Kavanagh, RICS asked – How do you communicate in a disaster zone – are you able to use mobile phones for example?	Ian Holt: Generally – they do not find that there is a problem with communication. MapAction are often based in a disaster recovery camp – sometimes with the UN. There are ways and means of communicating as a result via satellite technology.
James Kavanagh, RICS asked – Certain languages are used by the UN and they tend to be self reliant. How do you help?	Ian Holt: It has taken a lot of work to persuade the UN that charities such as MapAction are there and are ready and willing to help. They do recognise the importance of our role now however.
Dr Neil Stuart, University of Edinburgh/RICS asked – Do Global Mapping help out at all with imagery?	Ian Holt: Sometimes, private data providers can be quite reluctant. Therefore, alternative techniques for gathering data are been researched.
Kari Craun, National Geospatial Tech. Ops Centre, USA asked – How do you fit in? i.e. who requests your assistance?	Ian Holt: We work under the UN to assist them. However, we make the call on when we move out there – just like many charities do. Our customers are anyone in the disaster zone that needs spatial data.
Kari Craun, National Geospatial Tech. Ops Centre, USA asked – How about co-ordinate systems as there have been significant lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina relating to the very many co-ordinate system that are used in the world?	Ian Holt: This has been identified by MapAction as a problem also. The solutions are reached as and when they come up against such issues in the field.