



## CONFERENCE REPORT

### *UN-Connecting the World*

#### – Online Tools for a better-informed World Society –

International Conference Center Geneva (CICG)

20-21 May 2010

*Co-hosted by*



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## Report on Workshop Outcomes

### A. The Digital Divide Workshop -

**(Moderators – Nora Sophie Lietzmann and Markus Mayr, UN-i.org)**

#### Overview

While the main focus of “UN-connecting the World” was to discuss ways to improve the effectiveness of the UN information system online, this workshop was of particular and high importance: its goal was to evaluate best practices and to discuss alternative ways by which UN information can reach its stakeholders across the digital divide.

#### Defining digital divide

Based on the workshop discussion, the following features were identified as main points to consider when defining the digital divide: access to digital information, skills and various external factors that influence the capacity of obtaining either of the above mentioned. First of all, digital divide can be influenced by the lack of physical access to technology, which prevents individuals from being digital citizens. At the same time, when discussing the digital divide, one must also consider imbalances in skills needed to access digital information. When it comes to factors that can influence the access to technology and the capacity of individuals to use existing technology, they can vary from region, organization, political conditions or sensibility of information. Nevertheless, even in cases where the needed skills and access to information are existent, regime restrictions (censorship) sometimes play a major role in enforcing digital divide.

#### Users perspective and contribution

One of the main considerations regarding the digital divide with respects to information dissemination and ICT skills have to be the definition of user groups, the contextualization of the approach taken within the current technological and infrastructural problems/possibilities and the integration of such approaches in these conditions and their development. This results, first, in the acknowledgment of the purposeful limitation of the approach to actors with at least an access



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to a minimum online capability. This limitation is not unsatisfactory, though, due to the ability of further information proliferation and increasing access to broadband access.

Second, any approach has to be integrated in the transformative development towards online capabilities in low-bandwidth and low-internet penetration countries. This similarly implies the integration of an approach within the context of traditional ways of information dissemination, i.e. radio, printed media, physical interaction.

Thirdly, the adaption to the approach to different ways of communication and different ways of technological development, i.e. organizational structure of decision making and the prevalence of mobile broadband media.

Fourthly, the related issue of localization and regionalization was addressed. Disseminating information has to be driven by a localized and regional approach that caters local and regional conditions, ways of communication, information needs and dissemination possibilities.

Fifth, the position of state actors within the UN information dialogue was considered. While institutional and political constraints of state actors to communicate at eye-level have been underlined, the inclusion of these constraints in a communication and dissemination approach does not mitigate possibilities of interaction, but just re-shapes the mode of interaction. Lastly, the issue of privacy and information security was repeatedly raised. Especially in politically sensitive surroundings and regarding issues of high political relevance, the importance of security in countries low-bandwidth access and constrained ICT skills was stressed as being of utter importance when considering new approaches to disseminate and exchange information relating to issues covered by the UN.

## **B. Public Outreach Needs of the UN System –**

**(Moderators - Edgar Krassowski, Bearing Point, and Rike Maier, UN-informed.org)**

### Overview

The workshop brought together various database administrators and other stakeholders such as IT companies not directly related to the UN system, in order to discuss different types of information management systems. The discussion focused on the challenges and the utility of various tools for the United Nations information system.



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## Challenges of United Nations information databases

Representatives of UN information databases and IT companies underlined a series of challenges in processing UN information. First of all, characteristics of the metadata, such as its impressive size and complex structure, may pose several issues. The collection of UN information must be preceded by an in-depth research and a clear understanding of different types and utility levels of information. Moreover, considering the size of the metadata, the opportunities of UN information portals coming with the use of new technologies, such as text mining and other ways of automatically structure information were underlined.

Secondly, the existence of various databases structuring UN information bears the danger of duplicating efforts and creating a mirror of already existing information. Therefore, an efficient online information system would allow databases to interact and would enable information sharing and linkages between various knowledge ecosystems dealing with the same type of information.

Finally, another issue was identified in presenting complex information in a structured and comprehensive manner which would allow users with no education on the United Nations system to access information useful to their work. The future of UN information databases should make use of existing technologies, in order to educate the databases so as to fit the users' needs, rather than extensively educating the users in order to fit the requirements of online information systems.

## Users perspective and contribution

The most important aspect of developing a UN information database is the needs of users. Finding a way to satisfy the needs of citizens from 192 countries, of various age, profession, cultural background or educational level is the highest challenge we face.

When addressing this issue, one of the key answers is user feedback. Thus, the development of a database should consist in a continuous process, which aims at permanently improving and adapting the system to the users' preferences. In order to achieve this, a clearly defined contact person or contact / feedback address needs to be made available to the users.

Direct user contributions seem not easily applicable to the UN information system, as in depth knowledge is required in order to provide e.g. accurate tagging suggestions. However, this could



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be compensated by implementing a quality check of the other submissions, carried out by experts. Further, privacy issues of the users need to be taken into consideration.

### Common standards

A lack of common standards was expressed to be a major impediment of an efficient UN information system. Standardized meta data would help ensuring that submissions (both by administrators and users) for e.g. tags would fit a common standard. However political interests may interfere with this option in certain areas.

### Communication between platforms

In order to avoid the previously addressed problem of duplication of work, the workshop participants expressed a need for increased sharing of information between UN information providers. A platform or database or rtf (rich text format) solution allowing one Specialized Agency to access the plain data, collected and uploaded by another could be a first step.

### Added value

The added value of a UN information platform should be a selection of high quality resources. Search engines such as Google, which use only computer generated relevance counts, cannot lead to a structured, efficient access to information for the user. An information platform needs to suggest information (documents and links) to the user, ensure transparency concerning sources, explain the context of the displayed data and provide answers to frequently asked questions.

## **C. Joining the Conversation: Benefits of UN-i.org and UN-i.org User Needs –**

**(Moderators - Marian Sutholt and Astrid van der Merwe, UN-i.org)**

### Overview

As *UN-i.org* is still in the early development stage, this workshop was designed to let future users of the platform decide on the exact setup and features *UN-i.org* should have in order to deliver the highest utility. The goal of the workshop was to acquire as much input and feedback as possible in order to develop *UN-i.org* based on user needs and current best practices.



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### Offline and online networks

The workshop started off with an introduction to Facebook and the networking features it offers. Marian Sutholt (MCM) explained how, on such platforms, offline networks are mirrored online.

The added value of such platforms, thus, is that they allow their users to stay involved in the community and keep in touch with their personal networks.

At the same time, platforms such as Facebook simultaneously disseminate information to your network of friends, reaching a broader audience than the email would.

Finally, Facebook features such as upcoming birthdays, the possibility to see friends of friends, friend suggestions, might be a way to not only maintain, but also extend your network.

### Challenges of existing web 2.0 platforms

The workshop participants joined a knowledge sharing session aimed at describing advantages and challenges of web 2.0 platforms for social networking

- Users can be confronted with the problem of private and professional use of Facebook. The limitations can be identified on both levels: when it comes to the personal level, it is difficult to keep private information away from your professional network. At the same time, from the professional perspective, it is impossible to add, share and access content;
- When it comes to fan-pages, organizations can be confronted with the issue of several existing pages, out of which just one is official;
- Fan pages are used by organizations in order to try to answer as many answers as possible and communicate in both ways. However, at times, comments which are posted on Facebook lack the needed content;
- Sometimes, platforms such as blogs and forums allow communication combined with content, and might thus be more efficient than Facebook fan pages;

### Advantages of existing web 2.0

- Through the news feed option, information is coming to the organization's profile welcome page, which makes it very easy to quickly access news. On the downside of this, organizations need to ensure effective moderations of their news feeds, in order to prevent the overload of messages and un-necessary information;



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- Web 2.0 tools are included more and more in the PR strategy of organizations, which allows the development of a bi-directional information flow and feedback; nevertheless, some organizations allow comments on their website homepage, which makes it possible for users to comment on specific content.
- One example of successful use of Facebook was <http://www.usahidi.com/>: they started to build a network, maps and bring together all the information from Facebook, Twitter, etc. The result was one database for the Haiti Earthquake. Even though there has been
- Critique in terms of feasibility, in the end it proved to be so important that it became the one reference and resource point of information. Thus, introducing (new) web 2.0 or web 3.0 tools might be more interesting than PR efforts.
- E-learning platforms are also used by organizations on a more extensive basis. Courses are provided online, and results are measures regularly in order to improve the system. However, out of trust and knowledge security reasons, users are usually required to obtain membership in order to access courses, and many potential users are discouraged by having to sign up for yet another account.

### Ideas behind UN-i.org

Marian Sutholt (MCM) presented the underlying concepts behind the communication and knowledge sharing platform that MCM envisions to develop. Facebook is more successful than other network communities, because it reflects personal networks best. The same type of network could be developed in a professional sphere, allowing individuals and content to interact for a better communication, knowledge sharing and efficient networking.

The main challenge in using existing web 2.0 tools for professional purpose is the lack of context. Platforms such as Facebook do not allow users to add content to the context. The concept of UN-i.org is based on the need to develop a platform that mirrors all needs in professional behavior at once. The added value of UN-i.org will consist in the creation of linkages not only between individuals, but also between individuals and content and content sources themselves.

Finally, UN-i.org envisions a specialized search engine, which would show the user the personalized results that he/she is most likely to be looking for. As opposed to existing searching engines, such as Google, which show the most popular results, UN-i.org would be tailored also to the needs of experts, who have much more interest in deeper content.



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## UN-i.org Q&A session (questions were answered by Marian Sutholt and Ioana Sirbu, MCM)

### *How should implementation work? Forced vs. organic growth?*

- Step 1: identify the thematic platform issue to start off, e.g. Malaria;
- Step 2: open up to the public and gather input and develop the platform in the respective thematic area.
- Step 3: consult other communities and provide them (crowd source) with the advice and technical support they need, with the goal of offering such support at the lowest cost possible; be self-sustainable;
- Step 4: crowd different UN communities on one platform and being able to open this up to necessary inter-platform communication.

### *What is the future perspective? Will UN-i.org be incorporated in the UN System or stay on an NGO level?*

- The main goal when developing such a platform is for it to be used. We will choose for the direction that is most suitable with our aim: operate it at NGO level, UN level or both.

### *What is the exact target group and goal?*

- The envisioned target group will consist in professional UN-stakeholders, media, academia. Information on the platform should be public. Signed in users will be the community that contributes to the platform. The platform will be open to the viewing public, which only retrieves information and has no incentive or possibility to contribute appropriately.

### *Will there be a feature of NGO “yellow pages”?*

- Yes. Everyone is envisioned to be an equal member.

## User needs and preferences

The discussion focused on various features that UN-i.org should provide in order to fit the needs of its users:

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- The scope is crucial. Funding is likely to come from governments, foundations and trusts or the private sector. In order to attract funds, MCM needs to make sure that the platform is not too wide scoped.
- The platform should contain functions that will bring user back, such as events calendars or online debates.
- Information should be structured in a user-friendly way. Fundamentally, the platform needs to pool people, and focus on a community, such as the community of people who want to see a strong, effective UN. Might be easier to sell and expand later.
- The platform should offer the possibility to set up “private” working or discussion groups.
- Oversight pages and summaries for subjects and sub-subjects should be established, compiled by experts or a filtering and summarizing mechanism.
- The platform should be a place for really interesting content that is not created but compiled and it should showcase interesting topics such as award winning ads.
- UN-i.org should link to other global campaigns and piggyback on major events in the world and its interfaces/frontends should be tailored to the expectation of the special target group and linked to the same backend.
- The platform could also target beneficiaries of UN interventions to tell their stories, but users should not be suffocated by only the UN agenda. Grass-root campaigns should be included, too. It’s about bringing different communities together.

#### **D. Prospects and Challenges of UN-informed.org –**

**(Moderators - Hannah Birkenkötter and Roxana Bobolicu, UN-informed.org)**

##### Overview

Mainly aimed at members of the international academia, the workshop will evaluate the viability of the research conducted by the MCM Initiative in the process of developing *UN-informed.org*. More concretely, it will discuss the different types of information that have been identified and the various classifications that have been applied to documents and clauses in order to be displayed



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on *UN-informed.org*. The workshop is likewise aimed to discuss probable difficulties that may arise in the categorization process in other thematic areas. For the long run, the goal is to establish an expert group to oversee the future research for *UN-informed.org*.

### Scope and type of documents

The possibility of including other types of documents apart from UN agreements, like state reports or SG reports, was discussed in the beginning of the workshop. Although such documents are undoubtedly useful, they might not be appropriate for the database, so one solution would be to have them on UN-i.org.

The possibility of including draft resolutions was also discussed. This would entail an interesting analysis for the users, as it would show the evolution of a document up to the point of adoption. This would definitely bring added value to the database. However, it is not an urgent feature, so it could be implemented in the long run, once we have extensive information in all thematic areas on the UN agenda.

### The user-friendly aspect of the database

Very concrete ideas were brought up during the discussion on ways to make the database more user-friendly. Among these ideas were suggestions to use more graphics due to their strong visual impact.

Another idea was to use histograms illustrating the time-line when certain topics were of interest and thus more documents were being issued on that particular topic.

One important aspect that was discussed regards the necessity of having the database in multiple languages – all UN official languages to begin with. This is definitely feasible and it should not require any extensive translations due to the format of the documents and also due to the fact that the official documents are already translated. Basically this would entail connecting the code of the document and the number of the clause from the different translated versions. The language problem could be solved in an efficient manner through a potential cooperation with the already existing databases on UN agreements.



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### User feedback

The user feedback aspect seemed to be one of the most important issues discussed. There was general agreement that it was a wise decision to launch a Beta version first to be tested by the users and then tailored to their needs. The advice provided during the workshop was to leave the database unchanged for a while and then gather massive feedback and make the necessary modifications.

### Determining the role of the user

One of the conclusions in the workshop was that some of the problems we are encountering at the moment could be solved with the help of the users. One such problem would be the long and complex process of tagging. This could be solved by giving the users the possibility to tag their own documents. Although this approach comes with some risks, it would overall be very efficient.

### Challenges for developing the full database

The main challenges brought up during the discussion were related to the large number of documents issued in the UN system and the risk of duplicating the existing work. While the issue of the amount of documents can be tackled with the help of an IT solution, that of the duplicated work can be solved through extensive communication and cooperation with the existing UN databases.

### Solution for a more efficient development

Overall, the main solutions developed throughout the workshop are, on the one hand, about exploring many existing partnership opportunities, and, on the other hand, about combining the different IT and research approaches in order to implement the database on a universal scale.