What CrisisCommons learnt from RHOK1.0

Last weekend (4th-5th June 2010) was the second [Random Hacks of Kindness](#), aka RHOK1.0.

RHOKs are hackathons designed to rapid-prototype software that can be used to manage information before, during and after crises like the Haiti earthquake. RHOK was one of the entities born out of the first CrisisCommons camp (other entites included [CrisisCamps](#) and the [Aid Information Challenges](#)), and because of this and its closeness to the CrisisCamp aims, CrisisCommons has always kept strong ties with the RHOKs.

Lesson 1: Ask for help if you need it. [Crisiscommons](#) realised last month that RHOK organisation was in trouble: we helped where we could, and the RHOK organisers were gracious enough to accept that help. We couldn't save RHOK1.0 London (two weeks to go and no announcements, no organisation and most crucially no venue arranged in a town that's getting harder and harder to find BarCamp venues in) but we did manage to do these things:

- Pass on as much of our experience of coordinating multi-camp, multi-timezone, multi-language and high-pressure CrisisCamps as we could. Mostly this meant lots of conference calls and emails, with Heather and Noel providing support to the Washington-based organisers.
- Sent CrisisCommons organisers out to RHOK camps that needed them. Heather Leson (@heatherleson) did an amazing job keeping RHOK Sydney going, although I'm still kicking myself for not putting myself forward when the call for RHOK Jakarta came in (I thought there were other people who deserved the trip more than I did).
- Raided the [CrisisCommons project lists](#) for suitable RHOK problem statements. This meant more sitting up late getting the project statements into readable order, but the CrisisCommons project managers (including Kimberly Roluf) did us proud.
- Gathered information, posted information and kept people engaged on RHOK problems before the RHOK camps (big up to Olidag for his work on the UAV problem).
- Built the RHOK wiki - with one days' notice! - ready for the RHOK camps to use (big up to @heatherleson, @spikeuk and Brian Chick for getting this sorted so fast).
- Ran a RHOK operations centre for the 47 hours (8am Sydney til 5pm Washington/Santiago) that RHOK1.0 was on (@spikeUK, @bodaceacat, Sahana's @rediguana on watch and wiki editing, with RHOK's Jeremy on the IT admin).
    - Watched the RHOK IRC channel, camp Ustreams (video and chat), twitter hashtags (of which there were many), wiki recent changes log and email for information that needed capturing (projects, video feeds, organisers etc) and projects that could be hooked up with users and external information providers.
    - Maintained the wiki in real-time so the RHOK camps knew what each other were doing and could coordinate if they were working on the same projects.
    - Created a virtual camp from our [VirtualCrisisCamp](#) templates.
    - Found information sources, existing projects and potential users for project teams

as they came online.
  - Kept people outside the camps informed about what RHOK was doing and [how they could join in with other work post-RHOK](#).
  - Told RHOK organisers and administrators about emerging issues as we found them.
- Worked as subject matter experts in RHOK hacking teams (Katie @filbertkm, for example)
- Told potential users (e.g. DFID, CDAC, the UN) that RHOK was about to happen.
- Judged the results (Noel)!

This didn't just go one way though - what CrisisCommons got in return was:

- New and/or improved applications for CrisisCamp and CrisisCommons responses - [Haiti Amps Network](#) got a huge boost from RHOK Nairobi, for example.
- More knowledge about how to set up a string of camps very quickly - remembering that the next time we do this, it will probably be for a major crisis.
- Much more experience in running a worldwide, short-term-focus operations centre.
- Lots and lots of new friends around the world.

Lesson 2: Have your infrastructure ready. The RHOK infrastructure was not ready for RHOK1.0. Without an Ops Centre, teams working on the same problems were likely to be unaware of each others' work. Without a fully-built wiki, it was difficult to know who to contact about what (including who the other countries' organisers were and where the tech support was). Without an agreed hashtag, the camps weren't all able to see each others feeds.   Crisiscommons did miss a few tricks in transferring its experience into RHOK though - one of these was forgetting to set multi-language options on the wiki early (people were tweeting in English, Portuguese, Spanish and Indonesian and language-specific wikipages might have engaged yet more non-RHOKers with what RHOK was doing).

Lesson 3: Build on existing work. If it's already been done, then use it (provided it's opensource of course) to build something better. We asked some RHOK teams why they hadn't contacted existing teams working in their application area; we suspected they were shy, and built these bridges for them. Other teams got out there and built their own bridges once they'd been given the contact details - the UAV team, for example, reached out to DiyDrones and other UAV usergroups, and started to link groups together.

Lesson 4: Talk to your users. Crisis management is not like office management software: it's measured in lives, not dollars. If you build something that nobody wants to use, then you've wasted effort that could have made a difference elsewhere. If you ask the people who might use your system about what they need and want, you'll build something that makes a difference, and it'll probably be a better system too. This is the big lesson that the RHOK1.0 winners (Chasm, a landslide prediction app that used an SME and was ready to go by the end of the weekend) can teach us all. We linked up all the people we could, but a bit more prior preparation (like warning

more of the potential users that RHOK was about to happen) could go a long way.

Lesson 5: Arrange 24-hour visible and robust support with no single points of failure. A huge hand to Jeremy for handling a nasty DOS attack on the RHOK servers having been woken up in the middle of (his) night. But he really shouldn't have been the only person with the priviledges to do this: two or three other admins arranged around the world could have helped a lot here.

That said, RHOK1.0 worked well and there was some amazing collaboration in teams across the world (yes, we're looking at you, UAV people, People Finder et al). The world has gained apps that will definitely save lives, and another bunch of people have learnt that they can make a difference by using their tech skills. Hats off the RHOK organisers for pulling this off from an almost standing start, and a big hand to all the people who worked behind the scenes to support them. I think RHOK is now established as an event, and judging by the reactions of people sad to leave it this time, it already has a groundswell of support. RHOK on!