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**INFORMATION SYSTEM
FOR FLOOD VICTIMS IN
POLAND—A PROPOSAL**

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INFORMATION SYSTEM FOR FLOOD VICTIMS IN POLAND—A PROPOSAL

BACKGROUND

Information management is one of the key problems encountered after any disaster, including floods. It is a problem during the immediate response, as well as during short-term recovery and long-term reconstruction. The issues include information acquisition/gathering by responsible agencies, information sharing among various organizations and institutions involved in the recovery and reconstruction process, and in particular, access by flood victims (farmers, homeowners, small business owners, local government officials, and other individuals and groups) to the information they need to rebuild their lives. Flood victims repeatedly cited these issues at the First Flood Aid Fair held in Racibórz in January 1998, and the Gmina Assistance and Reconstruction Program (GARP) subsequently identified the need to clarify and deal with these issues as a primary goal. The First Flood Aid Fair clearly demonstrated that reconstruction remained a major issue for flood victims many months after the July '97 flood and that a coherent information system - a comprehensive source of information about flood recovery available to all those in need of or interested in flood relief/reconstruction issues—would be a tremendous aid to all those who suffered significant losses during the floods. More recent flooding in southeast Poland (April 1998) once again emphasized the need for a viable system of information about aid available to flood victims.

As a first step toward achieving this goal, a Flood Aid Round Table (April 5, 1998) was organized by the government's Flood Relief Plenipotentiary, TRATWA—a non-governmental Information Center, and the Gmina Assistance and Reconstruction Program. The goal of the meeting was to create a framework for a new Information System for Flood Victims, which would sort out and distribute aid information to flood victims in order to facilitate reconstruction.

The Flood Aid Round Table was attended by representatives from over thirty institutions involved in flood relief programs who were willing to contribute to the new Information System for Flood Victims. During the meeting the participants identified key issues and assumptions and defined an organizational framework for further activities and their coordination. The Round Table Meeting unanimously adopted a resolution jointly to work toward constructing an Flood Aid Information System and signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU), indicating their collective commitment to mutual cooperation in this area. Following the Flood Aid Round Table working groups were formed to further elaborate the information system (IS) and plan for the pilot phase in Opole (Flood Aid Fair II) that would test the system (working groups meetings held on 7, 15, and 17 April, 1998 at GARP management office in Warsaw).

Aims of the System

The Information System for Flood Victims is intended to assist victims in reconstructing flood-devastated areas by providing them with easy access to information about aid and products/services available to local governments, small and medium enterprises, or individuals in need. The system is intended to be a central clearinghouse through which anyone can find comprehensive information about all the various resources available to aid flood recovery.

In order to achieve this overall goal it is vital to ensure that potential local users from flood-affected areas, both institutions (gminas, businesses, public utilities, etc.) and informal groups/individuals (home owners, farmers, etc.), have access to the system and information contained therein. Therefore, the structure of the system must ensure that offers of aid and other information reach these target groups and that system-generated information is adjusted to their needs and expectations and delivered in a user-friendly format. Conversely, the system must be easily accessible to each of these clients, and the clients must *be aware that it exists*. Hence one important component of the system is its promotion to create public awareness of the system.

As mentioned above, in order for the system to be efficient and durable it should include products and services marketed to flood victims. In addition to special offers with discounts to flood-affected customers, the system should cover regular commercial offerings of products and services marketed by businesses from sectors of interest to flood victims. Moreover, to the extent possible, the system should provide access to expert advice and technical assistance.

The planned system would serve not only to the victims of the 1997 flood; it is also expected to cater to the needs of those affected by recent flooding (of April 1998) and potential victims of any natural disaster that may occur in the future.

Overall System Building Strategy and Structure

In order to launch the Information System for Flood Victims as quickly as possible at minimal cost, the system designers adopted a strategy of integrating and expanding existing information resources (i.e., existing flood-related data bases) available from different organizations. This approach influenced the entire structure of the system, which would include the following elements:

- **Coordination Center**—The system requires a central point for both assembling and disseminating information. Such a center would be responsible for integration of data provided by individual sources (input data bases) and for facilitating contacts with potential information recipients.



■ **Input Data Bases**—As mentioned above, the system would compile and integrate existing bases of information on resources available for flood victims. This information would be provided by non-government organizations, government agencies, institutions and commercial companies that have already declared (for example at the Flood Aid Round Table meeting) or will declare their cooperation and involvement with the project.

■ **Local Information Points and Other Means of System Access**—To enable easy access by victims to flood recovery information, the system would include contact points in flood-affected gminas, regional offices of the government's Flood Assistance Plenipotentiary and local branches of non-government organizations responsible for providing system outputs (i.e., information on flood recovery) to individual users—members of local communities. Additionally, the system would include means (e.g., an 0-800 number, e-mail address, Web site, etc.) through which victims can contact the central Coordination Center.

Coordination Center

The Coordination Center would be the focal point of this information network. With its own large information resources and direct links to all input data bases, the center will provide requested information to all customers or search other data bases through its links with other information sources (nodes). Therefore, the Center will primarily serve IS customers who will receive requested information directly through local information points or via other means; however, it will also serve the agencies providing input data bases that will further disseminate information on behalf of the Coordination Center.

Functions/Tasks

The Center's functions and related individual tasks are as follows:

- Processing information about aid sources and products/services marketed to flood victims:
 - Collecting information about aid sources
 - Collecting information about marketed products/services
 - Information aggregation/integration
 - Gathering data from aid information sources
- Facilitating access to information:
 - Maintenance of a toll-free 0-800 information line
 - Maintenance of on-line e-mail access
 - Maintenance of a World Wide Web (Web) aid information page

- Maintenance of links to other source information pages
- Regular up-dates of information about aid opportunities and marketed products/services
- Disseminating information about aid opportunities and marketed products/services:
 - Development of publications [e.g., flyers, pamphlets, booklets, or catalogs] on flood aid products/services available to flood victims
 - Development of specific information in response to particular requests (from local information points or direct customers)
 - Regular system promotion
- Gathering information about existing assistance needs:
 - Direct recording/monitoring of aid requests
 - Collecting/registering aid requests channeled through local information points, as well as collecting other information (e.g., demographic data) about the nature of and sources of information requests

To summarize, the Coordination Center will exchange information both horizontally with input data bases and vertically with direct customers of the system. This will require diversified forms and means of communication.

It was agreed initially to use the Internet as the key medium for information gathering and exchange between the Coordination Center and input data bases, as well as for data integration. This will be achieved by placing links to input data bases on the Center's Web page. A preliminary survey of existing and potential technical capabilities of selected hosts confirmed the viability of this option; most were using, or had the ability to use, the World Wide Web to convey information. Of course more conventional information exchange media (such as telephone or fax) can also be used in contacts on this level.

On the other hand, in most cases both local information points and direct customers (individuals in particular) will address their questions and requests to the Center by telephone and/or fax, and in some cases by e-mail. In order to provide individual customers (in particular non-corporate ones) from flood-affected regions with easy access to the Center, a toll-free 0-800 information line will be established. In addition to its basic function as a communication channel for individual requests, the toll-free line will also aid the Center in gathering valuable information about products/services marketed to flood victims. Individual businesses are expected to submit information about their commercial offerings to the system using the toll-free line.



Both previous experience of flood aid institutions and a survey of potential customers' capabilities indicate that traditional mail is likely to constitute another important means of access to the IS (especially in the case of individuals living in rural areas). Others, depending on their technical capabilities, may well submit their questions by e-mail through the Internet. And a few more might access the Center's information directly from the Center's Web page. (Although of limited use currently, this means of access will undoubtedly increase greatly in the near future.)

Information on available flood aid will be disseminated primarily in response to questions asked by customers. This information will probably be conveyed mainly by toll-free info-line and mail. In the former case, readily available information will be provided on-line, while more complex questions will be filed and answered at a later date by mail, telephone or fax, depending on customer's request. Local information points will receive information similarly, depending on their technical capabilities.

Printed publications will constitute another important way of disseminating aid information. These will include both periodicals with flood-related aid information (i.e., small information bulletins) and occasional leaflets (specific bulletins) with information packages for specific groups of flood victims. Besides providing aid information, these publications will also help to promote the system.

A review of possible organizational arrangements revealed that the Coordination Center should be located at the "TRATWA" Non-government Center of Flood Aid Information. TRATWA is sponsored primarily by the Stefan Batory Foundation. Other TRATWA sponsors include: the Foundation for Local Democracy Development, AED Democratic Network Project, the Association for Forum of Non-government Initiatives, the Cooperation Fund, the Foundation for Poland, and the Klon/Jawor Center of Information on Non-government Organizations.

The TRATWA Center would constitute the core of the system, which would thus be developed in accordance with the approved strategy of expanding existing structures. Some of the principal reasons for selecting TRATWA as the leading organization include:

- TRATWA's mission statement - to coordinate the efforts of various NOGS after disasters—a complement to the aims of the planned IS
- TRATWA is already very active in the field of exchanging flood aid information
- TRATWA maintains a number of its own data bases, including those focusing on aid sources and commercial offerings available to flood victims
- TRATWA has adequate infrastructure, i.e., computer hardware/software and office automation equipment necessary for launching the system, as well as experienced and motivated staff and partners

- TRATWA has access to the Internet and owns a Web server
- TRATWA's Internet service has links to some of the flood-related data bases and information provided by other entities
- TRATWA publishes a regular Information Bulletin in both electronic and printed formats (circulation: 2000)
- TRATWA publishes occasional printed materials targeted at specific groups
- TRATWA sustains good working contacts with government agencies and a majority of flood aid organizations
- 12 partners (local branches of NGO's) from 12 flood-affected voivodships are connected to TRATWA's Internet network
- TRATWA has a stable group of information recipients from flood-affected regions (gminas, NGO's, media, Voivod's Flood Aid Plenipotentiaries, Voivodship Welfare Authorities)
- TRATWA has conducted a range of promotional campaigns

TRATWA management agreed to assign its staff members, some funds, all of its information resources (data bases, contacts, know-how) and equipment (computer, office hardware, Internet links) to start up the operation of the Information System for Flood Victims. In addition, the Gmina Assistance and Reconstruction Program management committed to provide financial, technical and staff support during system organization/start up phase (labeled the pilot phase) and to promote and disseminate the Information System for Flood Victims.

However, it should be noted that the combined funds and resources of TRATWA and GARP will ensure only start-up and operation of Information Center until the end of June 1998. Any further operation will require additional funding. Sources are expected to include other flood relief entities (a preliminary commitment has been received from the Stefan Batory Foundation), and in particular - and in accordance with earlier commitments - the government's Flood Ministry from whom extensive technical and financial support will be needed.

Minimum Technical Needs

The TRATWA Center has all the equipment necessary for launching the system (computer hardware/software, Internet access, Web page, telephone lines, office



equipment). However, the Center should be expanded at a later date, provided that adequate funds are available.

Input Data Bases

As already mentioned, input data bases will include both existing and planned data bases with information on different services and goods (including commercial offerings) available to flood victims, as maintained by non-government organizations, government agencies, institutions and businesses. These data bases are expected to provide the bulk of information fed to the system. Input data bases will perform the following functions and tasks.

Functions/Tasks

Providing access to aid information:

- Maintenance of a Web page with aid information and commercial offerings
- Regular information updates
- Direct answers to questions

Collecting information about existing aid needs:

- Filing direct aid-related questions
- Gathering of information about the kinds of questions asked and transferring that information to the Coordination Center

In order to perform these functions and tasks efficiently there are two prerequisites: (i) modification of the existing input data bases held by various entities to ensure uniformity and compatibility with the entire Flood Information System and (ii) access to these data bases through the Internet. A preliminary survey of data bases held by potential system members revealed that some of them were not compatible with the IS; these data bases were not available on the Internet. To solve this problem, during the initial pilot phase of system operation, those data bases which are not available on the Internet will be transferred in digital form to the Coordination Center where they will be reformatted for dissemination on the Internet.

Minimum Technical Needs

- Computer and modem
- Internet access
- A Web page with access to data bases

- Telephone
- Fax machine

System Information Points and Other Means of System Access

System information points are the IS components through which most initial contacts with potential customers will take place. These will include contact points/stands in flood-affected gminas or regional offices of the government's Flood Aid Plenipotentiary, and at local branches of non-government organizations. On completion of local government reform, local information points will be located in poviats (according to the government, flood relief activities will be based in poviats when the new administrative divisions of Poland are established).

Functions/Tasks

- Facilitating information access
 - Receiving customers' questions
 - Providing information from own resources
 - Directing customers to the Coordination Center
 - Local promotion of the system (e.g., information points, billboards, posters, etc.)
- Acting as middleman in information transfer
 - Transfer of questions to Coordination Center
 - Transfer of answers from Coordination Center to customers
- Collecting information about existing aid needs
 - Filing direct aid-related questions
 - Gathering of information about the kinds of questions asked and transferring that information to the Coordination Center

The extent of these functions and tasks indicates that the local information points will be crucial to establishing contacts between the system and individual customers—i.e., for vertical information transfer both from customers to the center and from the center back to customers. Local information points will be the primary means for reaching target customers from local communities in flood-affected regions.

In order for the system to achieve its goals, the local information points must promote the system extensively among local communities to ensure that potential customers are aware of this service and can submit their questions.



It is anticipated that most individual customers will contact these points personally, while the sites, in turn, will access the Coordination Center by fax or telephone. Depending on actual technical capabilities (which differ from one gmina to another), Internet-based access to the Center should also be sought. Local information points will also serve as points where information can be displayed for potential customers. Finally, they will also act as information collecting (as well as dissemination) points regarding client needs.

Through preliminary arrangements, local information points will be located at headquarters of flood-affected gminas, Regional Offices of the Minister-Government's Flood Aid Plenipotentiary and at local branches of non-government organizations, which will be powiat-based in the future. The first of these locations is especially important, because most gmina residents first contact local authorities for information and aid. Therefore, adequate support from authorities at higher levels of government (mainly the Plenipotentiary's Office) is a prerequisite for overall success of the project, as this support is likely to encourage local officials to participate in the system. Potential access to aid programs, both government and non-government-based, should be highlighted as the main incentive for participation of individual gminas in the system.

As in the case of the Coordination Center, information will be provided on-line to calling customers or in-person during their visits. Of course, this applies only to readily available information. More complex questions will be filed and answered at a later date by mail, telephone or fax, depending on the customer's request.

Good performance of individual local information points will require extensive training of those responsible for their management. The training curriculum should cover, as a minimum, Internet basics, general knowledge of the Flood Aid Information System, as well as various promotional skills/methods. In addition, persons dealing directly with clients should be trained, at least minimally, in listening and counseling skills, since the system will undoubtedly serve as a place where victims voice not only their needs but also their frustrations and concerns. Considering that local information points will be scattered over a large territory, organizational and technical issues are likely to pose particular difficulties. The best solution would probably consist of one-day training events for 10-20 representatives of local information points held at the voivoid level. This approach would help to minimize costs and organizational problems associated with delivery of training to those responsible for management of local information points.

Finally, as mentioned above the system will include means such as an 0-800 number, e-mail address, and Web site, through which victims can contact the central Coordination Center directly, rather than through local information points.

■ Minimum Technical Needs

- Telephone
- Fax machine

- Computer, modem and (preferably) Internet access.

Preliminary Project Cost Estimate

This preliminary estimate of costs associated with creation and operation of Flood Aid Information System Center is based on the following assumptions:

- The Coordination Center would consist of: premises of approximately 25 sq.m; staffing by five persons, of which one would be responsible for direct contact with the government's Plenipotentiary Office, and two would be in charge of the toll-free information line; computer and telecommunications hardware, software, and office furniture.
- Local information points would be located at seats of flood-affected gminas (about 150 of them), Regional Offices of the government's Flood Aid Plenipotentiary (10) and/or local branches of non-government organizations; also in poviats seats in the future (where they would require premises of about 3 sq.m, a computer, modem, a part-time employee [1/4 time], a desk, bookshelf, and telephone/fax machine).
- Costs associated with system promotion prior to its launching would be covered partly by TRATWA, and partly by other sources.
- Following system start-up, the Coordination Center would be responsible for general promotion of the system, while local information points would promote it locally.
- Input data bases would be maintained by their respective institutions or organizations using their own funds, at no extra cost to the system.

■ **Coordination Center:**

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| — Capital expenditure: | PLN 90,000 to PLN 95,000 |
| — Operating (monthly) expenditure: | PLN 30,000 to PLN 32,000 |

■ **Local Information Points:**

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| — Capital expenditure: | PLN 9,000 to PLN 10,000 |
| — Operating (monthly) expenditure: | PLN 1,500 to PLN 1,800 |

These figures reflect maximal costs of the project, while actual expenses will depend mainly on the number of local information points and cost sharing by their hosts. Assuming that at least two local information points are established in all gminas that suffered the



most from the flooding (a total of roughly 170 points), then total costs associated with system creation would amount to PLN 1.80 million, while operating expenses would be approximately PLN 310,000 to PLN 320,000 per month.

This calculation is based on the assumption that potential local information points are not equipped with any of the needed devices and their hosts are unable to share project costs. However, actual costs of the system will undoubtedly be much lower as potential hosts (gminas, Regional Offices of the government's Flood Aid Plenipotentiary, local branches of non-government organizations, poviats) are expected to contribute in-kind and share some of the operating costs (payroll expenses, provision of premises and equipment, etc.).

Most potential hosts of the local information points already have or are expected to acquire necessary equipment and expertise. For example, under an USAID-financed program currently being implemented, flood-affected gminas are to receive computer hardware and access to the Internet.

Accordingly, the actual capital costs associated with the project should be limited to expenses associated with the organization and additional financial support of the Coordination Center, while the only operating expenses to be borne would be those related to the Center's operation. Therefore, actual costs connected with system implementation/operation are estimated to be:

	Capital Expenditure	Operating Expenses (per month)
Coordination Center	PLN 70,000-75,000	PLN 30,000-32,000
Local Information Points	—	—

Again, it is assumed that system costs will be shared by a number of entities. This will help to create a system that is independent, permanent and immune to changes or financial difficulties encountered by individual sponsors; it will also make it possible to adjust the system to the expectations of various flood aid entities and locations.

Under this "pluralist" approach to financing the Information System for Flood Victims, the Office of the government's Flood Aid Plenipotentiary plays a key role. Other entities expected to share project costs include non-government organizations (e.g., the Stefan Batory Foundation, which has committed to sharing some of the project costs), foreign assistance funds and local governments.

Components Critical to Good Performance of the System

Preliminary assessment of various project components and available information revealed a number of elements that are critical to good performance of the entire system, in particular to its reliability and accessibility to individual local recipients. The following areas are of key importance in this respect:

- Technical contents of input data bases
- Appropriateness, clarity, and accuracy of input data bases
- Access to input data bases on Web pages
- Existence and organization of local information points
- Technical capabilities of local information points
- System information and its promotion on the local level
- System accessibility to individual customers from flood-affected regions and adequate format of information adjusted to users' expectations
- Knowledge and communication skills of persons providing information through the system—either locally or at the Coordination Center

It was agreed that efforts should focus on these critical areas.

Existing Resources and Efforts

As already mentioned above, the implementation of the Information System for Flood Victims is already underway. Below are lists of resources allocated to project implementation and activities already undertake.

Resources

- A team of 10 full-time specialists from TRATWA and GARP Program have worked on the design, organization, and technical activities connected with system launch and promotion.
- Funds have been allocated from both TRATWA and GARP for project implementation, initial operation, and promotion of the Coordination Center.
- Technical equipment and support (premises, office furniture, computer hardware, Internet server and Web page, telecommunications and office automation equipment), for the Center's operations have been provided by TRATWA.
- TRATWA has provided both data bases and information resources.



Activities

- TRATWA's information resources have been modified to match the needs of the Information System for Flood Victims:
 - Data base upgrade
 - Web page upgrade
 - Preparatory steps to create Internet links to input data bases
- System promotion and information materials have been developed by TRATWA and GARP:
 - Special issue of TRATWA's Bulletin
 - Catalog of Second Flood Aid Fair held in Opole
 - A manual reviewing assistance programs and credits available to flood victims
 - Development of flood-related regulations
 - Posters and leaflets promoting the Second Flood Aid Fair and the pilot phase of the Information System for Flood Victims.
- Regular contacts and cooperation have been established by GARP with input data owners so that GARP can aid them in adjusting their data bases to the needs of the Information System for Flood Victims (issues have included modification of data formats, topicality, arrangements for Web access, links to the Coordination Center).

Pilot Program Implementation

In an attempt to launch the system as quickly as possible, the pilot phase of the IS was implemented at the Second Flood Aid Fair held by USAID's Gmina Assistance and Reconstruction Program in Opole from June 4 to June 6, 1998.

The main goals of this pilot phase were to promote the system among potential users, to: 1) present the system to flood-affected local governments, enterprises, and individuals, 2) to test the system, and, albeit to a limited extent, 3) to verify its usefulness and efficiency. The pilot phase was targeted at the following four groups of potential users:

- Gminas
- Enterprises
- Home owners
- Farmers

The pilot phase of the IS catered to the potential needs of these users by collecting and providing access to information packages specifically tailored to each group's needs and expectations. The pilot system included the following elements:

- A toll-free 0-800 information line available during the fair and thereafter.
- Four consultation points located on the fair's premises—one of them for each group of potential customers.
- Internet access to the information system's Web page with data bases from the information line/consultation points.
- Printed materials on aid sources for particular groups of recipients.

Thus, depending on to which group a visitor to the fair belonged (gmina official, business owner, homeowner, farmer), that person was directed to the appropriate consultation point where he could voice his needs to a trained interviewer, receive the previously developed printed materials dealing with his area of concern, and (through the interviewer at that station) search the Web data bases for additional information and resources.

The pilot phase of the Information System for Flood Victims benefitted from the following facilities during the Fair:

- An 0-800 information line with four simultaneous call capability
- Two dedicated telephone lines to access data bases from consultation points via the Internet
- Computer hardware and modems (seven workstations, two printers) and telephone sets
- Technical consultants for management of the 0-800 information line and four consultation points
- Printed materials—specially prepared brochures

The consultation points were located near the main entry to the Flood Aid Fair, so that they were easy to find and accessible to all visitors. Computer hardware was provided by the Opole-based ZETO computer company free of charge. Peripherals (printers and telecommunications devices) were provided by TRATWA and GARP.

A team of technical consultants to support the consultation points and information line was established consisting of 17 volunteer experts to address areas of need for the



four groups mentioned above. These technical consultants were provided or appointed by selected organizations/institutions that participated in the original Flood Aid Round Table. They were selected based on having knowledge and expertise compatible with the probable needs and expectations of those contacting the consultation points at the Flood Aid Fair. The consultants were appointed by the Round Table participants as part of those agencies' signed agreement to support the Flood Aid Information System. Moreover, representatives from the Office of Minister—Government's Flood Aid Plenipotentiary also acted as consultants at the information points.

Prior to opening the consultation points, the volunteer consultants acquainted themselves with the contents and format of the system data bases and printed materials provided by TRATWA/GARP for the pilot phase of the IS. Moreover, they were trained in retrieving information from the Internet, and they were provided brief training in communication skills. Two training events for the consultants were held—one in Warsaw two weeks prior to the Flood Aid Fair and a second in Opole the day before the Fair opened.

The pilot program took advantage of the following publications:

- A special issue of the TRATWA Bulletin with a description of the Information System for Flood Victims
- Four special brochures on sources and aid opportunities available to each of the four groups of potential system customers
- A manual—outline of aid programs and credits available to flood victims
- A poster and leaflets advertising the Information System for Flood Victims
- A survey distributed to fair visitors

Printing costs of these materials were covered by TRATWA and GARP.

Along with establishing the technical means to conduct the pilot phase of IS at the Second Flood Fair, both GARP and TRATWA initiated efforts to promote the Information System for Flood Victims among potential customers from regions affected by the flood. Since the survey of visitors at the First Flood Aid Fair in Racibórz revealed that local press, radio and television are the key sources of flood aid information, promotional efforts focused on local press media, broadcasters and TV channels.

In addition to these promotional efforts, it is extremely important to take other steps to increase awareness of the Information System for Flood Victims and other available aid sources. In particular, various groups should be informed of the system through

professional associations, Chambers of Commerce, Regional Development Agencies and parishes.

Since the Fair was primarily attended by people directly interested in flood aid issues, i.e., by potential direct users of the Information System for Flood Victims, a survey of visitors was conducted. It attempted to identify potential system users' opinions regarding and previous experience with flood relief programs. The questionnaire included questions on respondent's knowledge of available flood aid opportunities, types and efficiency of existing information channels, reliability, topicality and timeliness of available information, effectiveness of flood aid applications, recipients' rating of flood aid information sources, etc.

Following aggregation and processing, survey results split into four main categories (gminas, enterprises, home owners and farmers) will be used to refine the system in terms of contents, methods, distribution channels and promotion, so that it can better fulfill individual users' needs and expectations.

Other Issues

In recent years, the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has developed similar information systems to deal both with victim needs following disasters and with long-term preparedness and mitigation. The FEMA system includes the establishment of a toll-free 800 telephone line following disasters to enable victim registration for assistance, as well as the establishment of on-site "Disaster Assistance Centers" (DACs), which are places where victims can go to learn about and apply for the various resources available to them. It might be worthwhile for representatives involved in the Polish Flood Victim Information System to consult with FEMA, and, if possible observe these FEMA systems in action.

Additionally, FEMA maintains a major ongoing public information program to inform people of what individuals can do to mitigate any kind of disaster. That program includes maintenance of an *extensive* (thousands of pages) Web site, the issuance of press releases, and the publication of numerous brochures, and other educational programs—on-line, in print, and in person.

It may be that, for the Polish IS to remain viable, it should become part of a larger system of all-hazards information available both following events and during times of relative quiet. Flood issues may be too infrequent to sustain an ongoing information system. Thus, those involved in the Polish system might examine the broader FEMA public information system and consider eventually expanding the Polish Information System for Flood Victims into something larger, and, perhaps, more sustainable.

Natural disasters typically are followed by a "Window of Opportunity" during which victims and the institutions that serve them are open to change and opportunity. That time

period varies with disasters but seems to begin following the immediately recovery and cleanup (say two weeks after the event) and continue for several months (perhaps up to nine months). It is important to make everyone involved in long-term reconstruction aware of the resources available to them at this time. Thus, the information system has to be ready to go when a disaster strikes. In addition, it is important to encourage victims at this time to consider reconstructing in ways that make them less vulnerable to future hazards. Later, as the memory of the disaster fades and other needs take priority, people are less likely to consider taking such additional measures.

An effective *national program to deal with disasters* (which is the ultimate goal) has to include a system for providing information both to victims and sharing information among the various entities involved in aiding victims. And, that such a system should not have to be reinvented after each disaster, that it is possible (indeed, very desirable) to plan ahead and design such a system so that government and others can respond quickly and effectively when the time comes.

The IS should recognize that one of the needs that the system would serve would be as a place where victims could express their needs, frustrations, and fears—simply a place where they could tell their story. That is, the system would inevitably serve a function similar to that of the "Needs Board" at the First Flood Aid Fair held in Raciborz. Victims at the Flood Aid Fair very much appreciated having someone to whom they could tell their concerns, and moreover, someone who would try to do something about those problems. It is well documented in the literature on disaster psychology that there is a strong need among disaster victims just to voice their problems (while not necessarily receiving immediate solutions), and one of the functions of any agency responding to victim needs inevitably is to be a *listener*. Indeed that has increasingly been the role even of government agencies, and government has recognized, that to be effective it must demonstrate a real interest in and ability to listen to its constituents' problems. Like it or not, this will be a significant function of any victim information system and it should be planned for and incorporated into overall system design.

The IS is sustainable in itself. There are two options. First, the system could be packaged as an "off the shelf" tool to be activated only in the months following a disaster, but then put aside until needed. (The FEMA system in the US is basically activated and de-activated that way. FEMA relies on a network of "reservists"—people who are on-call and can be called up when needed, but who are otherwise employed when not needed.) Alternatively, as suggested above, the Information System could evolve into a larger all-hazards system of information that includes all sorts of information about disaster preparedness and mitigation. Indeed, that system could include an active education and dissemination program that could include such things as the publication of printed materials, the sponsoring of workshops or school education programs, etc. Whatever the case, obviously it is now critical to somehow ensure the long-term institutionalization of this system, so that it is not a one-time event and so that the knowledge we've gained and the work we've put in is not lost.

Concerning the establishment of an on-going IS, it might be desirable to create a basic system *without* local information points—using only the 800 number, Internet (Web and e-mail) access, printed materials, and educational programs. The local information points could then become an element that is activated only during recovery and reconstruction following disasters. This design feature might be potentially viable and sustainable for the IS. In addition, developing an on-going educational system might help justify the costs of the system.

The value of this Information System is inherent to good government policy. For example, the government could point to the Flood Information System as the answer to one of the key problems cited in the recent evaluation of the government's response to the flood. Constituents expect governments to display a willingness to both listen and respond quickly to their needs. An Information System like the one proposed here would go a long way to fulfilling that need.



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