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Case study: GISCorps Volunteer Work

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Case (for presentation to students)

GISCorps is a non-profit organization, founded in 2003 under the aegis of the Urban and Regional Information Systems Association (URISA). It coordinates short-term, volunteer-based GIS services to underprivileged communities worldwide. GISCorps supports humanitarian relief, emergency response, health and education, local capacity building, and community development. In its brief history, GISCorps has worked on a wide range of relief projects, including assisting response efforts to Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi (summer 2005), the aftermath of severe storms and flooding in Missouri (spring 2008), and the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in various areas of Myanmar (Burma, spring 2008).

Volunteers are carefully screened for professional competence and a match of skills and availability with the mission at hand. GISCorps also has a code of conduct posted on their web site at http://www.giscorps.org/conduct/conduct_volunteers.php. This code is provided in addition to URISA's Code of Ethics and states that volunteers must adhere to the following principles:

- ❖ Remain software neutral
- ❖ Seek the most appropriate and sustainable technology and solution for the community in need.
- ❖ Make recommendation without exploitation or regard for personal or agency profit.
- ❖ Refrain from accepting software donations.

A certified GIS professional (GISP) has volunteered through GISCorps to assist in the response to a tsunami which has devastated the coastal areas of a developing country. Help is needed to support damage assessment and critical search and rescue operations by local authorities. Volunteers are needed with skills in map production, simple spatial analysis, and data management, as well as proficiency with GPS receivers and general experience in disaster

management. Participating volunteers include those from GISCorps, but also other organizations. A GIS software company has also donated licenses of its product for use in the emergency. *This donation has been made to the local authorities only.* However, the number of volunteers and local residents available to map the tsunami damage and critical rescue corridors is much greater than the number of available software licenses. Time is of the essence as many people will die from lack of fresh water if rescue crews are not able to find the best routes to them around destroyed buildings and debris carried inshore by the tsunami waves. The GISP is aware that several of the other volunteers are using “bootleg” copies of the software.

References

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Resources for teachers

Suggested discussion points

1. Which of the GISCI Rules of Conduct pertain to this case?
2. What is the best way to approach fellow professionals when non-ethical practices are noticed, especially under duress?
3. Does “civil disobedience” trump codes of conduct when people’s lives may be in danger?
4. What obligations does the GIS analyst have to society, to employers and funders, to colleagues and the profession, and to individuals in society?

Relevant GISCI Rule of Conduct

Section III, Number 7: “7. We shall honor the intellectual property rights of others, including the rights to software, data, and other relevant information and analysis associated with the work of others. Furthermore, we shall adhere to software and data licensing requirements and the specifics contained in associated licensing agreements..”

Further resources

Digital video

YouTube (2007). GISCorps volunteers on their Katrina experience (and associated videos).

Digital video file accessed 16 June 2008 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZtUhtRyStM>

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