



3 questions for a leader in technology for disaster response

By [Catherine Cheney](#) 20 January 2016 <https://www.devex.com/news/3-questions-for-a-leader-in-technology-for-disaster-response-87609>

A refugee shows a picture on his smartphone. Connectivity is such an essential component of the refugee crisis because people crossing borders are relying on smartphones to get essential information and to let their family know that they are safe and healthy. Photo by: [Muse Mohammed / International Organization for Migration / CC BY-NC-ND](#)

Restoring Internet and telephone services is becoming a key component of disaster response, and integral to the delivery of immediate needs like food, water and shelter.

That is where companies like **Cisco Systems Inc.**, a technology company based in San Jose, California, come in to help provide connectivity to both victims and responders. Cisco has a tactical operations team dedicated to disaster response. The West Coast team lead is Rakesh Bharania, a **network consulting engineer who has designed and deployed networks for disaster response from the 2010 earthquake in Haiti to the Ebola virus last year.**

Bharania has volunteered with the American Red Cross since he was 18, but he didn't see the intersection disaster response has with his career in networking and information security until he started with Cisco. Devex spoke with Bharania about the role of tech companies in disaster response, the refugee crisis and what he's learned. Here is an excerpt from that interview:

How would you characterize the role of the tech community in disaster response?

As you look across the tech world to the companies that have crisis response functions, they all kind of look a little bit different based on whatever the organization does or what their corporate mandates are, but what you do find is there is close collaboration across these companies.

Even though some of these companies are competitors in the business marketplace, the people doing crisis response know each other and have camaraderie and collaboration ... You don't really see the competitive marketplace influences happening during a crisis. It's a very small community of people who do technology in emergencies and in crisis environments and we all kind of know each other from going to the same conferences and meetings and we run into each other in the field. So the trust relationship is definitely there. ...

Everybody who does this at Google and Microsoft and Ericsson understands that we're using technology to save lives and help communities restore normalcy after a crisis. We all get what the big picture is. And so the maturity of the community is such that those competitive drivers that you might suspect really don't appear in this space.

Can you expand on the role of technology in the refugee crisis?

In the case of the Syrian [refugee crisis](#), one of the things we noticed, or were told from folks on the ground in Greece and Europe, was as people would cross from Turkey into Greece and the first question off the boat was "Where am I?" and the second question was "Do you have Wi-Fi?"





Connectivity is such an essential component of the refugee crisis because people are coming across and relying on their smartphones to get maps, to get essential information, to let their family know that they are healthy. The ability to deploy Wi-Fi to the islands of Greece, or strategic locations along the refugee route, was identified as essential.

We brought all of our experiences around cyber security to the Syrian refugee crisis because what we realized is that people who are making this journey into Europe and carrying these smartphones — their entire lives are on these phones including people still in harm's way back home — so they may have family members who are still in conflict zones. At least as long as they're connected to our infrastructure, we might have to consider who would try to steal that information. That threat is a real and very troubling thing we have to consider.

When we talk about cyber security it's not just protecting the aid workers but it's also trying to protect the people the aid workers are trying to help. It's a full spectrum problem ... No refugee is going to go up to an aid organization and say "I'm going to give you my information but can you ensure me you're encrypting it and protecting it properly?" But the aid organizations have to realize just because the refugee in the field will never demand that of them they have the duty to do it anyway.

You've said that your job is to know the difference between innovation that works well in Silicon Valley and innovation that works well in a refugee camp. What is needed for more people and organizations to come to that understanding?

There's actually a great opportunity ahead of both the private sector and the tech community as well as the humanitarian community and the development community. There is a lot of really great innovation and technology coming out from the tech sector, but making sure that is adapted and appropriate and used successfully by humanitarian and development communities takes collaboration between two sides.

To the extent we can get both sides talking, so tech folks understand what the needs are in the field and what solutions may be available in the tech community, that is what needed. Those conversations are happening more and more. Previously there was standoffishness. I would get into meetings with the aid community and they would say, "I don't trust the private sector because you're out there for sales." But when you get the right players in the room, you can say, "We want to help you in your mission. How do we best do that?" The trust relationships are increasingly there and I'm optimistic about collaboration being fully strengthened.

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Catherine Cheney covers the West Coast global development community for Devex. Since graduating from Yale University, where she earned bachelor's and master's degrees in political science, Catherine has worked as a reporter and editor for a range of publications including World Politics Review, POLITICO, and NationSwell, a media





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