



## Case study: GISCorps Volunteer Work

Version 0.2 • February 8, 2009

**Authors:** Dawn Wright (Department of Geosciences, Oregon State University), David DiBiase (Dutton e-Education Institute, Penn State University), and Francis Harvey (Department of Geography, University of Minnesota)

**Reviewers:** Chuck Huff (Department of Psychology, St. Olaf College), Michael Davis (Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions, Illinois Institute of Technology), and Matthew Keefer (Division of Educational Psychology, University of Missouri-St. Louis).

This work was supported by National Science Foundation grant # GEO-0734888. See below for terms of use.

### 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](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 includes 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 freshwater 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.

## Sources

- GISCorps (2008). GISCorps Code of Conduct: Volunteers. Retrieved 16 June 2008 from [www.giscorps.org](http://www.giscorps.org).
- Staff (2005). GISCorps aids hurricane response, *ArcUser Online*, October-December 2005. Retrieved 16 June 2008 from [www.esri.com/news/arcuser/1005/giscorps1of2.html](http://www.esri.com/news/arcuser/1005/giscorps1of2.html).
- Staff (2005). Closing the digital divide, *ArcUser Online*, October-December 2005. Retrieved 16 June 2008 from [www.esri.com/news/arcuser/1005/digitaldivide.html](http://www.esri.com/news/arcuser/1005/digitaldivide.html).
- Staff (2008). URISA's GISCorps working on Myanmar (Burma) cyclone recovery efforts, *Government Technology*, May 14, 2008 News Report. Retrieved 16 June 2008 from [www.govtech.com/gt/323386](http://www.govtech.com/gt/323386).

Draft

## 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? Are these the only two options from which to choose? In other words, does this case just boil down to a dichotomous choice between giving and not giving or is there a creative middle ground?
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: “When it is evident to a GIS professional that another GIS professional or practitioner is operating in violation of this Code, the GIS professional shall discuss ethical GIS work practices with the other person.”

### 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>

### Terms of use

Authors license this work under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA

