

CASE STUDY

Communication IS aid: involving communities
in aid provision in Isiolo, Kenya

About SIMLab and FrontlineSMS

Social Impact Lab (SIMLab) Foundation creates products that help organizations and individuals professionally manage and deliver services over SMS, lowering barriers to accessing life-changing information, enabling communities to make their voices heard, and helping organizations and individuals manage logistics in the most difficult environments. We provide a range of products, including FrontlineSMS, FrontlineCloud, and FrontlineSync. SIMLab's products have been downloaded over 200,000 times in 199 territories across a wide variety of sectors. FrontlineSMS is an open-source software that only needs a laptop connected to a GSM modem or mobile phone to run and lets you send, receive and manage SMS over a mobile network. The software works without the internet, is easy to set-up and operate, and is free. Users only pay the standard text messaging charges through their regular mobile provider.

COMMUNICATION IS AID



COMMUNICATION IS AID: INVOLVING COMMUNITIES IN AID PROVISION IN ISIOLO, KENYA

Introduction

The drought that struck parts of the Horn of Africa in the first months of 2011 generated an acute need to exchange information between affected communities and humanitarian organizations responding to the crisis. Between June 2011 and March 2012, ActionAid International Kenya and infoasaid conducted an innovative humanitarian assistance pilot to improve communication systems and food aid delivery using mobile technology.

The link between information and accountability to crisis-affected communities is at the heart of ActionAid's human rights-based approach. If information is not shared with communities, how can an organization demonstrate transparency? And if an organization does not listen to communities, engage with them in a dialogue and ensure that their feedback is acted upon, how can that organization claim to be accountable?

Underlying the project's design was ActionAid and infoasaid's shared belief that communication is aid, in its own right. To overcome the numerous challenges in rapidly communicating with large numbers of people in a vast area with poor roads and security incidents, the project used several communication platforms to send and receive information. These platforms included two mobile phone technology solutions, FrontlineSMS and Freedom Fone, as well as community bulletins.

About ActionAid and infoasaid

ActionAid is among the world's leading anti-poverty agencies, working directly with over one million poor and excluded people in over 20 districts of Kenya. Starting in the early 1970s with educating children, ActionAid now focuses on tackling the root causes of poverty rather than just meeting people's immediate needs. The organization is primarily concerned with defending and raising awareness of human rights, be they economic, social, cultural, civil or political. Employing local staff in its work, the organization supports projects and programs that promote the interests of poor and excluded people at all levels. Recognizing that poverty cannot be fought single-handedly, ActionAid works with others in the fight to end poverty and injustice.

infoasaid was a DFID-funded project implemented by a consortium of two media development organizations - Internews and BBC Media Action. The overall goal of the project, which closed in late 2012, was to improve the quality of humanitarian responses by maximizing and enhancing the amount of accurate and timely information exchanged between humanitarian responders and crisis-affected populations. It worked directly with a small number of aid agencies to help inform and support their communications responses in a variety of emergency contexts.

Before the pilot: reliance on roads, but an emerging use of mobile phones

Many of the communities in Isiolo suffer from chronic drought and food shortages and nearly three quarters of the county's total population lives below the poverty line (International Medical Corps, April 2011). ActionAid has been working on development projects with rural communities in Isiolo County for more than 15 years. The agency has been heavily involved in emergency drought-relief projects throughout this period.

The project staff first undertook a baseline study between May 2011 and March 2012 to form the basis for measuring change over time as a result of the project. At that time, ActionAid's only tool for communicating with food-aid recipients was through its network of Field Officers. Most communications with Field Officers from the Isiolo office took place via mobile phones. However, in instances where a Field Officer could not be reached by mobile phone, ActionAid staff based in the Isiolo office travelled to conduct face-to-face meetings with them, or with the Relief Committees – women-led groups of elected community members that volunteer to assist with ActionAid's distribution of food and help represent their community. By June 2011, infoasaid had identified that although this communication generally worked, it was slow and labour-intensive. This was exacerbated by security incidents, poor conditions on the road, and lack of time to travel to all Relief Committees. Community engagement was limited and focused more on extracting information on project outputs rather than listening to communities' needs and concerns. A deteriorating security situation in Isiolo was making it more and more important that communication with local populations was fast and reliable - but many committee members lacked phones and the means to charge them.

Lack of access to market price information also made it harder for communities to manage scarce resources at a difficult time. Pastoralists had to rely on information from traders to determine if, when, and at what price to sell their goods. They sometimes endured the long journey with their animals to Isiolo market, only to learn that buying prices were low. However, they might still be forced to sell because the animals were too weak to make the return trip home. For pastoralists, such a lack of information substantially increases the risk that they will undersell their products. For consumers, the information asymmetry might result in price differences for the same or similar products in markets that are geographically close to each other.

These points indicated an urgent need to change the status quo to increase efficiency, improve accountability, and make a significant impact during the crisis. Working closely with the ActionAid team leader for North Eastern Kenya, infoasaid developed a proposal for a pilot communications project to be conducted in Isiolo County.

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End poverty. Together.

Bei za bidhaa katika soko ya Isiolo kwa wi

tarehe ya bei/...../.....

A. mahindi (kilo)	40
B. unga wa mahindi (paketi ya kilo mbili).	60
C. mchele (kilo)*	70
D. unga wa ngano (kilo)	65
E. Maharagwe (kilo)	70
F. viazi (kilo)	30
G. nyanya (kilo)	30
H. cabbage (kilo)	20
I. kitunguu (kilo)	70
J. sukuma wiki (kilo)	20
K. mafuta ya kupikia (kilo)*	240

Habari kutoka: idara ya kilimo)

Habari muhimu

ctionAid kaunti ya Isiolo

34 164: pia tuma ujumla

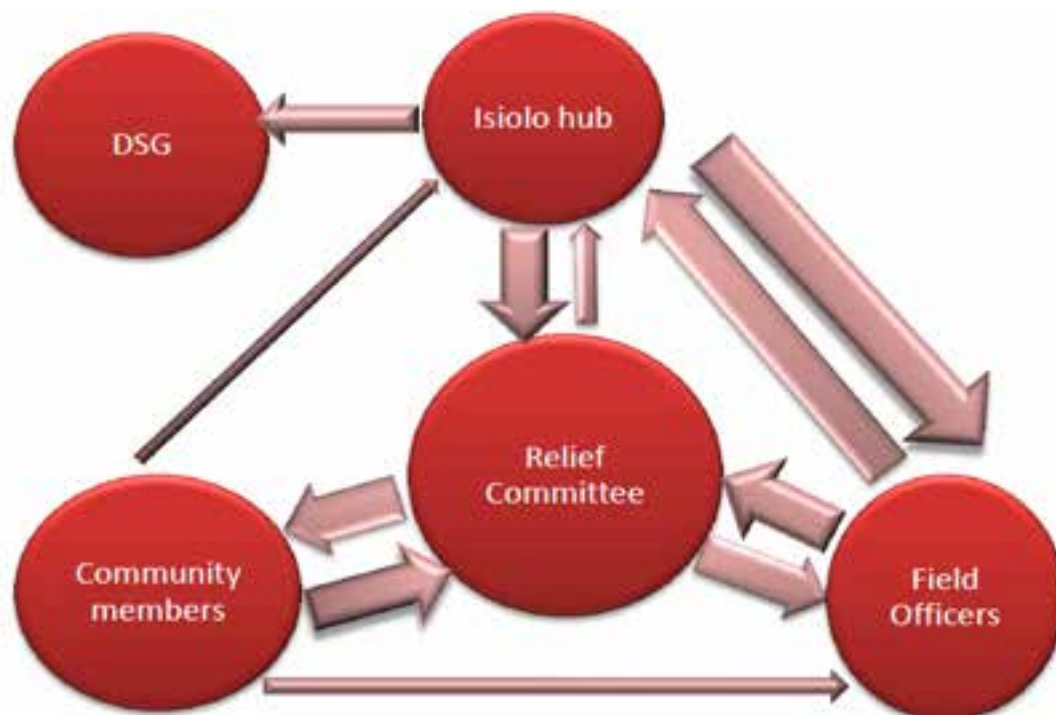
Meeting the Challenges Through FrontlineSMS and FrontlineForms

The project as designed would improve communication between ActionAid and the communities it was serving, and test the project team's belief that information itself could be a form of aid to the community. The project also supported monitoring and reporting by improving data collection.

The project would use FrontlineSMS as a tool for disseminating information quickly between Relief Committees, Field Officers, and any other key stakeholders in ActionAid's humanitarian assistance programs in Isiolo. Market price information would also be shared with communities via SMS. In addition, any texts received by the community would automatically be recorded in a database, enabling ActionAid to analyze, verify, and ultimately respond to questions or problems. As illustrated in Diagram 2 (below), the mobile phones and FrontlineSMS software made Relief Committees the central point for exchanging information between several stakeholders. Staff would be trained and required to submit a certain number of data records per month using FrontlineForms.

Community members found SMS communications from ActionAid very helpful. They reported being able

Diagram 2: Information flow from the ActionAid Isiolo office to communities via FOs and RCs (the thickness of the arrow depicts the frequency of communication)



to better organize their time now that they knew when to expect distributions, and were more likely to appear at the right time, speeding up the operation. Distributions which usually took an entire day were finished in a few hours. A Relief Committee member in Oldonyiro commented that “there's a big change now. Long before, food used to stay overnight because there was no communication. Now we get

information immediately, even when the trucks are still in Isiolo. We are aware that food is arriving soon, and we get ready for distribution.” By providing communities with vital information, and enabling them to seek information, submit feedback, and interact with humanitarian organizations such as ActionAid, communities become greater participants in their own recovery process.

Wider focus group discussions with Relief Committees and community members corroborated this, indicating that they felt the project was addressing their problems regarding monthly food distributions. Community members even requested additional information be provided on topics such as education and weather patterns in the future. At the time of writing, weather forecasts from the meteorological department were regularly shared via SMS.

The SMS bulletins through the Relief Committees created information channels between the communities in Isiolo and a wide range of actors that otherwise may not have been accessible, including government ministries, meteorological departments, the World Food Programme and ActionAid Kenya. Not only were beneficiaries better and more rapidly informed about ActionAid’s activities, the communication channel also allowed the field staff to receive crucial updates on security incidents, water shortages and disease outbreaks directly from community members. In one instance, a series of raids in Isiolo caused communities to flee their villages and ActionAid staff were quickly informed and adjusted the food distribution point to a safer location.

When interviewed about the project, Field Officers asserted that the more timely, frequent, and reliable communication between themselves and Relief Committees had significantly improved food distribution operations and increased their productivity. Similarly, findings from focus group discussions highlighted the importance of this two-way communication for Relief Committees, who felt better able to express and resolve their communities’ needs. ActionAid’s staff in the Isiolo office remarked that the information received from Relief Committees (and some community members) improved their operations and had provided valuable insights into the needs and concerns of the target communities.

The use of SMS data collection through FrontlineForms was also a success. Prior to the communications project, data had been collected on paper and transported to the Isiolo office in food distribution trucks. This information therefore arrived only once the distributions had been completed. It was sometimes lost in transit, and always had to be manually entered into the computer. This meant that the collection of critical information for FFA activities could take a couple of weeks to complete.

After the introduction of FrontlineForms, the Field Officers and ActionAid staff commented that they were able to gather information more rapidly and securely. Furthermore, they found the forms very easy and quick to complete. However, broader implementation has been slow, as creating new forms is harder.

Finally, access to market price information was well-received by communities, although no quantitative data on changes in income due to the price information was available. One Field Officer described how the information bolstered their credibility within the community. They explained that “having livestock and commodity prices improved my relation with the community. (...) They trust me more than before because I receive information from the hub. (...) I sit down with the community, together with Relief

Committees, to come up with a strategy on whether to sell products because the price is high or to store them if the price is low.”

The improved transparency achieved by providing valuable market information allowed communities in Isiolo to receive current prices and avoid middlemen when deciding to sell their goods. By allowing pastoralists and farmers to assess market conditions more accurately, they were also able to avoid the loss of livestock and produce. Moreover, using SMS communication has bolstered relationships between ActionAid Field Officers and local communities by improving ActionAid’s credibility. This project has contributed to global poverty reduction goals; disseminating market price information corresponds with the World Food Programmes objective of strengthening resilience in the region.

Summary of the Learning and Plans for the Future

Using FrontlineSMS software, ActionAid has strengthened communication channels and improved the effectiveness of its work by increasing the speed and frequency of communication between multiple stakeholders (ActionAid staff, Relief Committees, Field Officers, and community members). The feedback from communities revealed that beneficiaries feel empowered by the ability to acquire valuable information and communicate needs, as well as crucial logistical information. Together, these outcomes of the pilot project have helped promote accountability and fostered trust between the organization’s staff and the communities they work with.

While certain elements of the project require further evidence to assess their effectiveness, including the sustainability of equipment and assessment of financial impact of the project, the case clearly demonstrates the value of establishing effective communication channels as a deliverable in humanitarian interventions. As of June 2014, the SMS project is still operational and now incorporates weather forecast information, which is sent once a month from the meteorological department in Isiolo. It also supports communication to farmers in field schools supported by a livelihoods project, sending information on commodity prices, livestock prices, planned project operations and the weather forecast.

The system reaches 65,000 people.

Supplies and Hardware used

FrontlineSMS version 1.6.6.3 with modem, Huawei E173.

For FrontlineForms, a java-enabled phone, Nokia 1280.

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A close-up photograph of a person lying in a hospital bed, covered with a blue blanket. The person's hand is holding a silver Nokia mobile phone. The background shows a striped hospital gown. The text "COMMUNICATION IS AID" is overlaid in white capital letters.

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FRONTLINE SMS