Final Reflections:

Integrating Local Media and ICTs into Humanitarian Response in the Central African Republic

(November 2012)

A project implemented by Internews and funded by the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF)

Final Report, #4, written by Patrick Vinck, Ph.D. and Jean-Pierre Dushime

Executive Summary

Internews' project Integrating Local Media and Information and Communications Technology (ICTs) into Humanitarian Response in the Central African Republic (CAR) was an ambitious project aimed at improving emergency response, community participation and community resilience.

This report presents the final reflections of the monitoring and evaluation process that accompanied the implementation of the project.

The key findings are that:

1. The project was **highly relevant and appropriate and the added value of Internews' work was unanimously recognized**. in the context of CAR where humanitarians lack access to quality information and media capacity development is acutely needed. The high reliance on local radio as a source of information makes it an appropriate channel to establish the type of dialogue needed.
2. At the same time, the **technology had some characteristics incompatible with the context of the CAR**, including the reliance on text messaging which is not popular among the population, and the need for connectivity.
3. The **lack of mutual trust between humanitarians and journalists** quickly emerged as a key challenge for the successful implementation of the project. While the type of changes needed need long-term involvement, the presence of Internews renewed the dialogue and opened avenues for collaborations between actors
4. **While journalists reported improvement in information collection and sharing, humanitarians took a mainly passive role.** They consulted the reports and maps, but contributed little, and the information did not directly influence decisions or actions. This is in part the result of the reliance on their own information network and mistrust of media and crowd sourced data on the ground of validity and risks.

These key findings leave also several key lessons to be learned:

1. The problems faced during the pilot projects and **limitations to the effectiveness of the program are vastly outside of the technology** and require focusing on the relations between actors and on capacity development.
2. The success of establishing two-way communication relies first on **establishing trust and mutual respect between actors**.

3. The processes and platform developed to generate two-way dialogue between humanitarians and affected communities through the **media have the clearest relative advantage in areas were humanitarians have little to no presence**.
4. **Capacity development is the most important component** of the implementation of the technology.

The pilot project yielded promising results to change practice and behaviors that may ultimately lead to improve emergency response, community participation and resilience, and accountability for humanitarian actions.

These very ambitious objectives were not achieved within the life of the project, but reporting improved and relations between actors evolved. Changing behaviors, habits of thoughts and ways of doing things is perhaps the most difficult thing to do.

More experimentation and pilot projects are needed for the approach to become standard practice. These projects should emphasize the need for capacity development, trust building and adopt resilient platforms that offer multiple ways for affected communities to communicate with journalists.

Future projects should also build on the relative advantage that technology offers in areas were humanitarians have little or no presence and/or where they cannot rely on their own field staff to establish communication with affected communities.

This will require humanitarian agencies to be willing to experiment beyond what they currently do in terms of information gathering and communication approaches. It will also require flexible funding mechanism to create learning opportunities.

Introduction

Between February and September 2012, Internews implemented a pilot project "Integrating Local Media and Information and Communications Technology (ICTs) into Humanitarian Response in the Central African Republic (CAR)" awarded by the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF).

The project was set up as an innovative system to foster a bounded network of trusted local media organizations gathering real-time first-hand information from local populations that once verified and validated by a coordination center in Bangui, were uploaded into a crisis map (www.cartehumanitairerca.org) publicly accessible. The objective was to create a two-way communication flow between local population and humanitarian organizations putting local media and ICT at the core of it, eventually improving emergency response, community participation and community resilience.

In partnership with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and Ushahidi, Internews trained a network of journalists to gather, aggregate and analyze information submitted by local journalists and community members using short text messages (SMS). This information (i.e. reports) were then relayed by local radio stations and community correspondents around the country to a central coordination hub run by the Association of Journalists for Human Rights (RJDH in its French acronym). The RJDH is a local organization that was founded in December 2010 at one of the journalism training sessions organized by Internews to overcome the difficulties of communication caused by power outages, lack of Internet access, bad roads, and rebel occupation in several areas. Reports from the population and journalists were made accessible to humanitarians and other journalists with Internet access through an interactive humanitarian map that was set up to facilitate the exchange of information between local journalists and humanitarian organizations. The goal was also

for humanitarians to engage with the community, working with local journalists, and posting reports on the same platform.

This report presents the aggregated findings from the monitoring and evaluation process that paralleled the implementation of the project. It builds on automated reporting of technical data, baseline interviews with humanitarian workers (17) and journalists, and additional interviews at the end of the project with 13 journalists and 12 humanitarians.

The findings also build on two surveys conducted in Obo and Zemio, two towns located in Haut-Mbomou. Each survey was conducted among a random sample of 400 adult residents of the towns and their surroundings. Haut-Mbomou is a remote area of eastern CAR affected by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a notoriously violent armed group.

The analysis of the project's performance is limited by the nature of these data sources. Qualitative interviews with humanitarians and journalists may not represent the views of all actors, and surveys may be affected by inaccurate recalls or social desirability that hinders discussion of sensitive topics. However, questionnaires were made simple and interviewers were trained to establish contact. No names were collected and respondents were not offered incentives to participate in interviews. Possibly the main limitation, however, is that the type of changes that the project hopes to generate are unlikely to be visible after just 6 months of implementation.

Findings

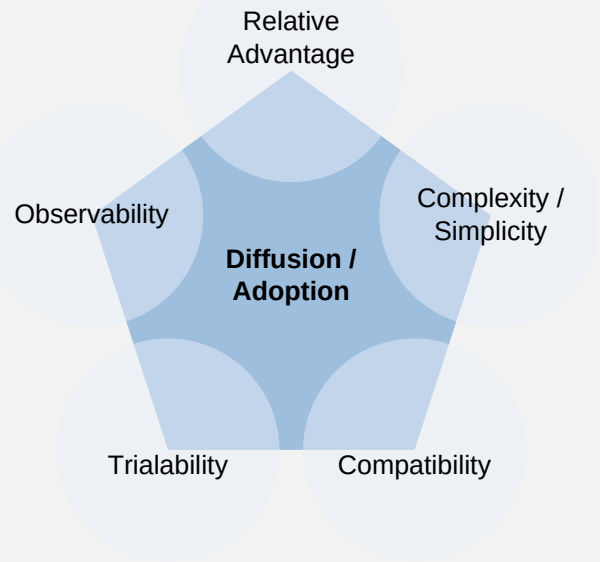
This objective of this final report is to examine the performance of the innovation in relation to existing practice.

The performance criteria for the innovation are laid out in HIF's monitoring and evaluation guidelines[1] and include established criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, coverage, relevance and appropriateness, and impact.

First, however, Internews' uses of innovative technologies is examined against intrinsic characteristics that are critical to the diffusion of an innovation: its relative advantage, complexity, compatibility, trialability, and observability.[2]

These characteristics directly influenced the effectiveness and impact of the project.

Figure 1: Characteristics of innovation



Characteristics of the Innovation

1. ***Relative Advantage:*** The first characteristic is concerned with the improvement made possible by technology over existing practices and behaviors.

[1] HIF: Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning in the Humanitarian Innovation Fund - February 2012 www.humanitarianinnovation.org/sites/default/files/hif_mel_note.pdf
[2] Rogers, E. M. (2003). Diffusion of innovations (5th ed.). New York, NY: Free Press.

Considering the weak existing system, **the added value of Internews' work was unanimously recognized**. All of the journalists interviewed for the evaluation reported that the platform and process developed with Internews improved the collection and sharing of reports from a larger audience, and over a larger geographic area.

The added value for humanitarians, however, is less straightforward. Existing practice mainly rely on direct dialogue with communities through field offices and/or visits, which is generally seen as a more reliable and trusted means of engagement. **The one area were the system provides a clear advantages are underserved areas were humanitarians have no or little presence.**

2. ***Complexity or Simplicity:*** The rate of adoption of an innovation is directly associated with how easy or challenging it is to use.

   One of the common complaints among the journalists is that the Frontline SMS platform at the core of the system was not well understood, and that the training had been too short.

   Only two radio stations were deemed to have a good working knowledge of the platform, which is largely the result of the higher level of training and technical assistance available to them. While additional efforts may be needed to make the platform user-friendly, the solution lies mainly in providing additional training and technical assistance.

3. ***Compatibility:*** New processes, activities and behaviors are more likely to be adopted if they are compatible with existing practices.

   While in general the use of the Internews platform is compatible with how journalist work, there are **a number of incompatibility issues** that **emerged throughout the pilot project**. At the population level, **communities are used to engage with journalists** from local media on a regular basis: In Obo, our rapid survey showed that one in five adults have contact with the radio.

   However, these contacts are most frequently made **in person or by phone calls**. The practice of **sending SMS is relatively incompatible with existing practices** because of the cost, low level of literacy, and relatively low cellphone ownership (e.g. in Obo, 21% owned a cellphone.)

   Among journalists, the use of the technology was somewhat incompatible with existing access to electricity and to Internet, as well as the cost of sending text messages. Finally, **among humanitarians, the innovation was incompatible with their perception of media**, but it did fit within the broad regular review of information.

4. ***Trialability:*** This project was a pilot implementation meant for the various actors to experiment with the technology.

   Trialability, or the ability for users (e.g. humanitarians, journalists, affected communities) to easily test the innovation, was therefore a central aspect of the project. The evaluation showed that **all the actors have experimented with the platform**. **However, humanitarians were the least likely to "try it out".**

   Half the humanitarians indicated that they consulted the map at least occasionally and 2/3 read the daily briefs published by RJDH. However, **out of 346 messages featured on the humanitarian map** between February and August 2012**, just two were issued by**

humanitarian organizations, and no humanitarians indicated having directly used the information to inform decision and/or action. This is in part the result of a lack of trust in the media, fueled by the overall poor quality of reporting in the Central African media.

5. ***Observability:*** The daily briefs and the humanitarian map were the most visible output of Internews project. Over the months of July and August, the humanitarian map averaged a number of 706 visits per month from 535 unique visitors. The blog of the RJDH, which features the daily briefs, averaged over 4,000 visits per month. Affected communities, however, had no or little access to these outputs.

   The only "observable" aspect of the innovation may have been improved information and mention of text messages in radio broadcasts. **According to the journalists, not enough emphasis was put on reaching out to the population to explain the project and encourage their participation. Additionally, since humanitarians did not use the system to inform decisions or actions, there is no direct observable result in terms of intervention**.

Performance Criteria

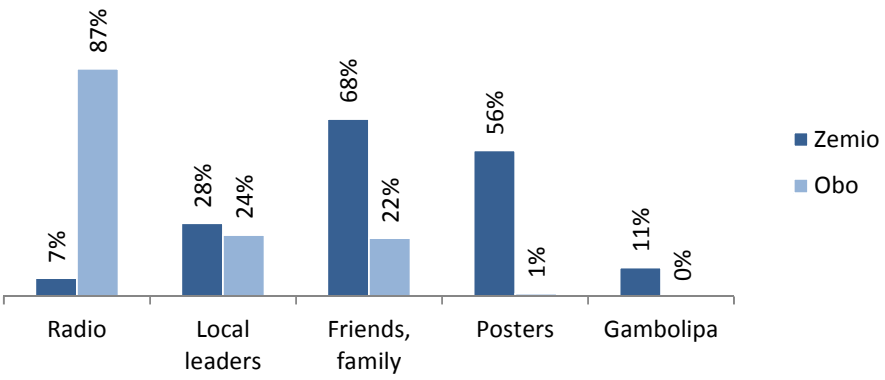
The performance of the project reflects the innovation characteristics and its implementation. The monitoring and evaluation process showed that:

1. **The project was relevant and appropriate:** Humanitarians indicated a lack of reliable sources of information on needs and local context, especially concerning remote areas of the CAR. They also indicated a deep mistrust of the media, which they perceive as lacking credibility, depth, independence, fairness, and as monetizing news coverage.

   At the same time, journalists saw humanitarians as unwilling to engage in an exchange of information other than a one-way "infomercial". The project was also relevant and appropriate for the population who rely on the media as a source of information. Most respondents in two surveys conducted among a total of 800 residents in Obo and Zemio, indicated being relatively well informed about humanitarian action. However, in Zemio, where no community radio exists, many respondents relied on informal sources of information, and one third of the respondents indicated wanting more information on humanitarian action.

   In contrast, most respondents in Obo relied on the local radio as a source of information on humanitarian action, suggesting that it is an important and appropriate channel for humanitarian information.

Figure 2: Sources of information on humanitarian action



Despite the overall appropriateness, some of the compatibility characteristics of the innovation – including the reliance on text messages, Internet access, and power supply in a context where none of these are widely used and/or available hindered its appropriateness.

2. **The project reached its intended beneficiaries (coverage), but not all actors engaged fully in the process.** The project targeted 12 community radio stations with varying broadcasts ability and range.

   Not all community radios and affected communities were reached but this reflects the targeted nature of the project. In Obo, one of the town with a community-based radio partner of the project (radio Zereda), virtually every respondent in a random survey of the population listened to the station, meaning that all benefited from the improved collection and sharing of reports among journalists.

   Only a minority of the population, however, contributed to the project by sending text messages. Not all the participating radios managed to implement the project entirely, in part because of structural problems beyond the control of the project that affected the functioning of the radios, and in part because of the limited know-how to run the platform as intended.

   Humanitarians were also widely reached by the project by a dedicated Humanitarian Liaison Officer (HLO). As outlined above, half of them consulted the map and more read the daily briefs. However, none of them contributed information as a way to engage journalists and/or affected communities, and none relied on the reports to inform decision or action.

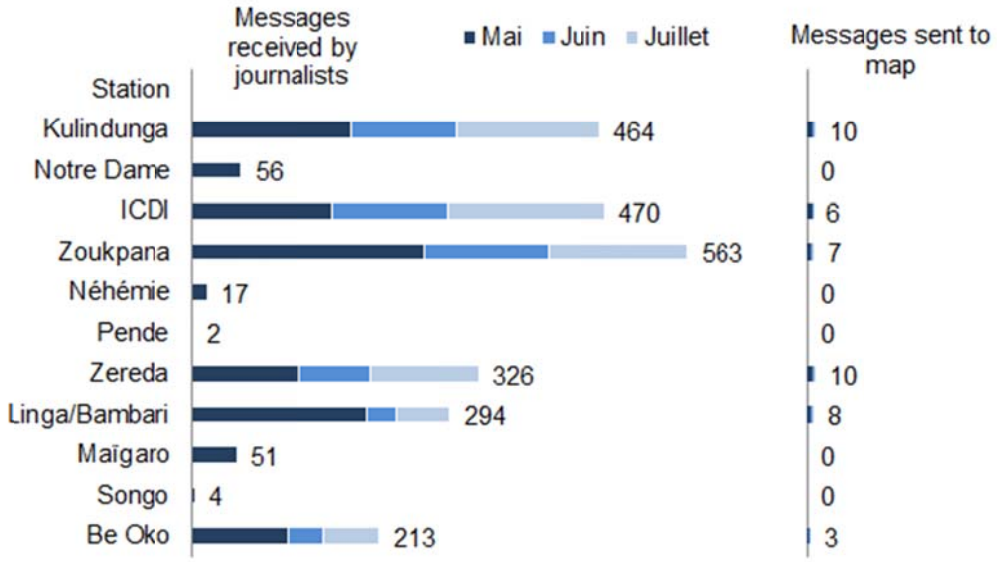
3. **The innovation fostered coordination and collaborations:** Internews established early on a strong collaboration with the RJDH, sharing offices and working closely together on the production of reports. However, this closeness raised concerns among humanitarians.

   Internews was quickly associated with the deep mistrust existing between humanitarians and media in the CAR and rebuilding trust became a major objective. At the end of the project, humanitarians still described the quality of the media in negative terms, but most recognized that efforts and collaborations were useful and productive. They reported improvement in their relations with media, leading to increased contacts and collaboration.

   Half the journalists reported improved openness and responsiveness from humanitarians, however, the other half remained negative, accusing humanitarians of being interested only in positive “publicity” rather than reporting.

4. **The project was effective, but its impact lies in strengthening media reporting more than improving humanitarian response**. One of the key findings - not so obvious at the onset of the project – is that technology works. The platform functioned well and achieved its purpose, from receiving messages to producing a live map. However, there were a number of limitations. Over a three month period, from May to July, radio stations received between 2 and 563 messages, for an average of 74 messages per station per month, or roughly 2.5 per day. Considering the barriers to sending messages, this is a relatively high number.

Figure 3: Text messages received and mapped



Most of these messages, however, were received in community-based radios located in the capital Bangui. Stations operating in remote locations received far fewer messages, and several did not manage to operate the platform as intended.

The design of the monitoring and evaluation system does not permit to examine whether the perception of humanitarians changed among the population. However, the surveys conducted during the project suggest high rates of understanding and, as mentioned above, a high reliance on local radio as a source of information on humanitarian action when they are available.

Journalists indicated that the SMS reporting mechanisms improved their reporting and sharing of information and helped engage the population. The main limitation to the success of the project is the absence of direct link with humanitarians' decision-making process.

Considering the short time span of the project, the objective of changing behaviors (e.g. how humanitarians gather information on needs and local context) was likely too ambitious to be achieved, especially in the context of mistrust and low quality of reporting. Humanitarians also mentioned security concerns over SMS based reporting.

Lessons learned

The findings from the monitoring and evaluation work generate several key lessons to be learned

1. The problems faced during the pilot projects and **limitations to the effectiveness of the program are vastly outside of the technology and require focusing on the relations between actors and on capacity development.** Changing behaviors, habits of thoughts and ways of doing things is perhaps the most difficult thing to do.

   What the humanitarian map did (and continues to do) is provide a test case to demonstrate the usability and overall simplicity of the system and its compatibility with and improvement over-existing ways humanitarians engage with affected communities. These characteristics alone should encourage piloting second-generation projects.

2. **The success of establishing two-way communication relies first on establishing trust and mutual respect between actors.** A sort of “reconciliation” is needed between humanitarians and the media, which requires improving the reliability of the media -a legitimate grievance among humanitarians-, but also requires humanitarians to be trained in how to establish relations with the media and enable the type of support that will improve the quality of the media.

3. The processes and platform developed to generate **two-way dialogue between humanitarians and affected communities through the media have the clearest relative advantage in areas were humanitarians have little or no presence and do not rely on their own field staff to establish communication with affected communities**. However, it is also in this context that the innovation is least compatible with the existing setting, because of the lack of electricity, Internet network, and among the population, the low use of cellphones and low literacy levels.

   The evaluation calls for the implementation of a more resilient system that provides affected communities multiple channels to formalize their reporting to media actors. This includes voice activated reporting and/or process changes to formalize contacts between journalists and the population.

4. **Capacity development is the most important component of the implementation of the technology**. While the software and platforms are increasingly user-friendly, many journalists were unable to use the system. Training sessions should maximize small group interaction, practical training, real life simulation, and peer-to-peer learning in order to create a resilient local resource to address technical problems.

The pilot project yielded promising results to change practice and behaviors that may ultimately lead to improve emergency response, community participation and resilience, and accountability for humanitarian actions. These very ambitious objectives were not achieved, but reporting improved and relations between actors evolved. The technology is merely an enabler of these changes and more is needed in terms of capacity development and building mutual understanding between actors.

More experimentation and pilot projects are needed for the approach to become standard practice. This will require humanitarian agencies to be willing to experiment beyond what they currently in terms of information gathering and communication approaches. It will also require flexible funding mechanism to create learning opportunities.