Humanitarian Innovation Fund

Case Study

SMS Feedback and Accountability in Somalia

Organisation: Danish Refugee Council
Project:
Piloting Accountability Systems for Humanitarian Aid in Somalia
Start Date: June 2011
Grant Period: 20 Months
Total HIF Budget: £ 141,000 (£100,000 from the HIF)
Location: Somalia

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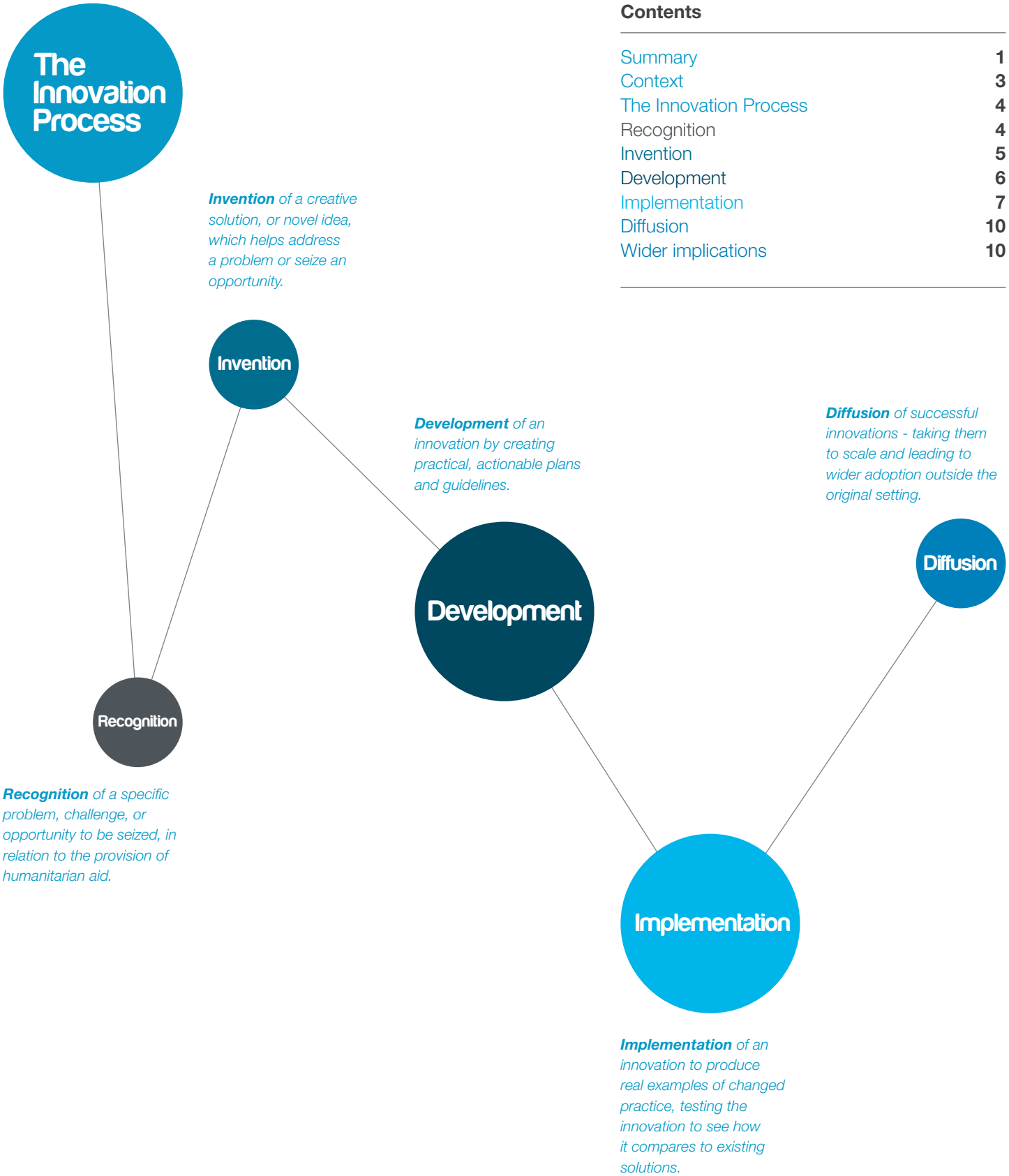
Summary

This case study explores the development and implementation of an innovative, mobile phone-based feedback mechanism by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in Somalia. In a complex conflict setting, characterised by major insecurity, lack of access for humanitarian actors, and limited civil participation in state structures, the project piloted the use of mobile phones and internet-based technologies to strengthen communication and feedback between beneficiaries, aid agencies, Somali communities, and the diaspora.

Capitalising on high levels of mobile phone usage in Somalia, DRC developed a system that allowed project beneficiaries to submit feedback by sending an SMS text, which was then logged, referred on and responded to. The message and DRC's response was then plotted to an online map, filtered by theme and location, using the Ushahidi platform (originally developed in Kenya in 2008 to map the spread of post-election violence). The project also sought to strengthen accountability more broadly by engaging local Somali communities and the diaspora in the work of DRC and other agencies, using social media channels. The DRC SMS project received funding from the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) to develop and test the platform across Somalia, focusing on beneficiary experiences of a community driven reconstruction project in Somaliland.

This case study explores how DRC used its understanding of the operating context in Somalia to develop the Feedback and Accountability System as part of its broader efforts to become a more accountable and transparent humanitarian organisation. The case study describes how the system was developed and implemented, and the specific challenges and constraints faced during roll-out. It concludes by discussing the wider implications of the innovation for other agencies in Somalia and beyond, capturing key lessons around understanding and mitigating risk, the importance of adaptability, the challenges of creating the right environment for innovation, the unpredictable nature of using social media, and the need to separate out the potential of a single innovation from wider processes of change.

The study is based on a review of the project literature, interviews with current and former project staff and partners, as well as focus group discussions with participating communities in Somaliland. The field research was conducted in December 2012. This case study is part of a series produced by HIF that explores how agencies which have received HIF grants have undertaken innovation processes in humanitarian practice.



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Context

Two decades of civil war in Somalia, causing large-scale displacement of civilians and severe food insecurity, have resulted in enormous humanitarian needs. Ongoing conflict between rival clan factions, cyclical drought and flooding, limited infrastructure, and the absence of an effective central government have all contributed to making Somalia one of the world's most renowned failed states. In 2011, a famine was declared in some parts of the country, and despite substantial improvements in the food security situation, 3.8 million people were in need of assistance at the start of 2013 –almost half the population.[1]

The enormity and complexity of the crisis (particularly in the South Central region) has presented particular challenges for the humanitarian response, most notably lack of access and shrinking humanitarian space.[2] Projects have tended to focus on providing short-term relief rather than mitigation or livelihoods support. Another complicating factor is that humanitarian workers (national and international) are at risk of attack and exposure to violent criminality. This has led many agencies to adopt remote project management, which brings specific challenges around ensuring quality programing and being accountable to beneficiary populations.[3]

Despite this bleak backdrop, the security situation has been improving in some parts of the country. In the north, the self-declared independent state of Somaliland has brought stability and relative prosperity; and more recently, many agencies have been able to increase their presence in the capital, Mogadishu, because of improvements in security and access. This more conducive operating environment has also allowed agencies to consider longer-term programming modalities, focusing on engaging local communities in the development process.

Across Somalia, the mobile communications market has flourished despite (or perhaps because of) the lack of state regulation, resulting in relatively high usage of mobile phones with access to some of the cheapest mobile networks in Africa. Because of low costs and literacy rates, Somalis appear to primarily use voice services – in line with the strong oral culture and nomadic lifestyle of the majority of the population.[4]

The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) opened its first office in Somaliland in 1998, followed by an office in South Central Somalia in 2005. The Somalia programme is now the largest of DRC's programmes across the Horn of Africa and Yemen, having grown rapidly in recent years. The organisation now has 17 field offices across the country, with most of the senior management team now based in-country. DRC's innovation with mobile phone and internet technologies, to strengthen beneficiary feedback and accountability in its Somalia programming, reflects its broader commitment to participatory development approaches and to becoming a more transparent, accountable organisation. It is one of a range of innovations underway by agencies and governments in different humanitarian settings (from early warning systems to cash transfer distributions), which demonstrate an increased willingness to experiment with mobile communication and other social technologies in order to strengthen programme impact.

Sunset in Hargeysa, Somalia, where the SMS system is managed from

[1] *OCHA (2013) Somalia Humanitarian Dashboard for the month of December 2012. Available at: http://us4.campaign-archive1.com/?u=89875c39a4e3ec7138b9661cf&id=d027574f3a&e=cc508cd154*

[2] *Palastro R (2012) 'Humanitarian response in conflict: from South Central Somalia' 2012 Humanitarian Exchange Magazine, Issue 53, March. Available at: www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-53/humanitarian-response-in-conflict-lessons-from-south-central-somalia*

[3] *Oxfam International and Merlin (2009) Remote Programming Modalities in Somalia –Discussion Paper. Available at: http://www.alnap.org/resource/7604*

[4] *Infoasaid (2012) Telecommunications Overview – Somalia. Available at: http://infoasaid.org/guide/somalia/telecommunications-overviewb*

The Innovation Process

Understanding the process through which an innovation has emerged is useful when trying to understand why innovations succeed or fail. There are various models to describe the innovation process, but the HIF uses a model that is based on five stages:

- *the recognition of a specific problem or challenge*
- *the invention of a creative solution or novel idea that addresses a problem or seizes an opportunity*
- *the development of the innovation by creating practical, actionable plans and guidelines*
- *the implementation of the innovation to produce real examples of change, testing it to see how it compares with existing solutions*
- *the diffusion of successful innovations – taking them to scale and promoting their wider adoption.*[5]

These five steps provide a useful archetype for the innovation process, and are used in the HIF case study methodology. But they come with the caveat that innovation is complex and non-linear, and identifying deviations from this model is just as important (and possibly more so) than confirming the applicability of the model itself when documenting the progression of an innovation.

The innovation model described above is now applied to the development and implementation of DRC's Feedback and Accountability System in Somalia.

DRC staff in the town of Caynabo inspect one of a number of information boards, which inform communities about how they can contact DRC, including via SMS.

Recognition

***Recognition** of a specific problem or challenge*

The starting point for DRC's innovation was a deep-rooted understanding of the Somali context and the operational and security constraints it posed. DRC also recognised that mobile technologies offered potential solutions to these problems – particularly around access and accountability in a remote management context.[6]

An important factor that enabled DRC to recognise this opportunity for innovation in its Somalia programming relates to the organisation's wider strategic direction – specifically a decision by senior management to prioritise increased accountability and transparency across its operations. For Peter Klansoe, DRC's Regional Director for the Horn of Africa and Yemen, the idea of piloting mobile phones and internet technology as part of feedback and accountability mechanisms in Somalia emerged as a bottom-up response from field teams to the organisation's broader commitment to putting accountability to beneficiaries at the top of its agenda.

[5] *Ramalingam B, Scriven K and Foley C (2009) 'Innovations in international humanitarian action' in ALNAP 8th Review of Humanitarian Action: Performance, Impact and Innovation. London: Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP). Available at: www.alnap.org/pool/files/8rhach3.pdf*

[6] *This can be seen, for example, in the first blog posting on the HIF website, Klansoe P (2001) 'Recognising innovation', 13 July, DRC Somalia blog: www.humanitarianinnovation.org/blog/DRC*

Invention

Invention *of a creative solution*

In the funding application submitted to HIF, DRC stressed the potential to harness existing and increasingly familiar information and communication technology (ICT) solutions. The project's ultimate objective was to strengthen demand for improved governance across public and community-based organisations. Specifically, the project would begin by aiming to make DRC and other humanitarian agencies operating in Somalia more open, transparent and responsive to the views and needs of beneficiaries and the wider public. These goals were to be achieved through:

- *creating a beneficiary feedback system using SMS mobile phone text messages*
- *building online communities through social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Flickr and Twitter.*

Although the pilot would initially only involve beneficiaries already participating in DRC projects – specifically the Community Driven Reconstruction and Development (CDRD) programme, a five-year programme delivered in partnership with UNICEF – DRC planned to roll out the system to other projects and agencies in Somalia to maximise its impact on improving transparency and accountability.

DRC's funding proposal outlined how the system would work (see Figure 1 below), tracking the flow of information from receiving an SMS message, logging it, translating it, following up and responding to it, and plotting it on an online map.

The HIF Grants Panel recognised the potential of this innovation, which, if successful, was ripe for replication and scaling up. DRC was awarded funding as part of the HIF's first round of large grants, and launched its Somalia Feedback and Accountability System in June 2011.

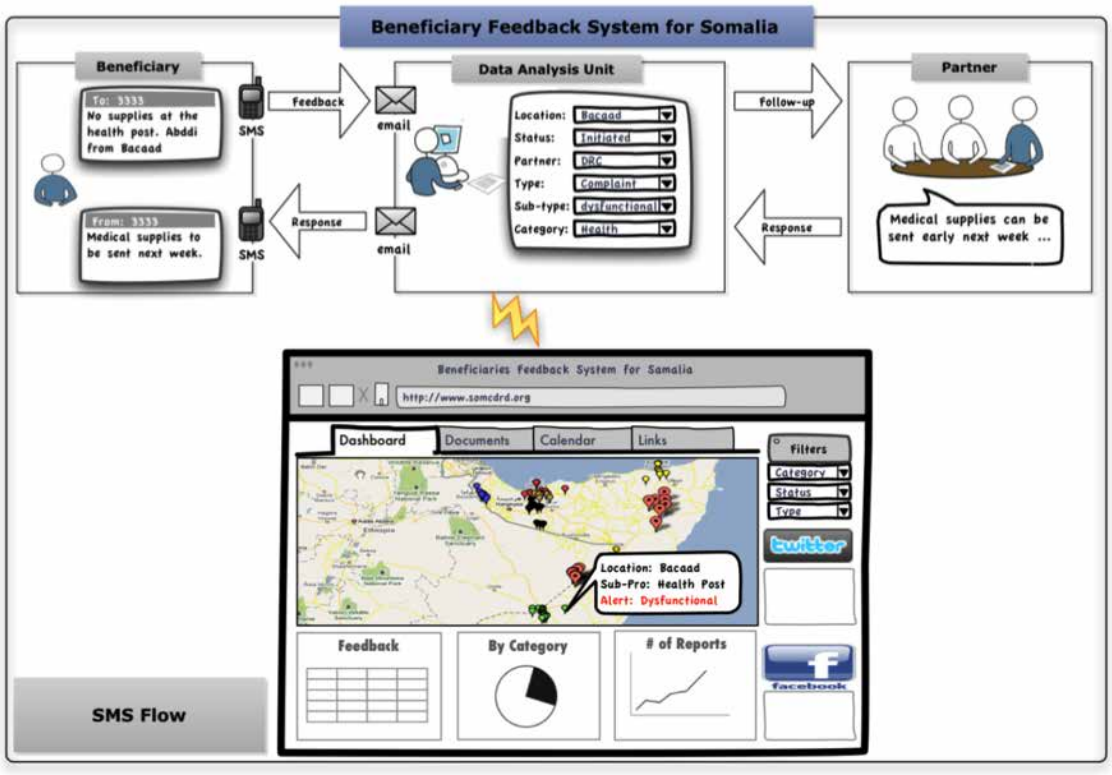

Figure 1: DRC's proposed beneficiary feedback system for Somalia

Development

Development *creating practical, actionable plans and guidelines*

The first three months of the grant period (June to August 2011) were set aside for the development and initial testing of the system to establish how to translate the innovation idea into practical, actionable plans. The free, open source nature of the products they planned to use allowed DRC to quickly develop a working system ready for testing and roll-out. Technology-led innovation processes that fail to take proper account of context and potential users are unlikely to succeed. Bearing this in mind, from the outset DRC involved programming specialists and technologists based in Somalia who were familiar with the local telecommunications context and existing web platforms.

From the early stages of the idea for the project, the Ushahidi platform was viewed as the model for presenting information received from beneficiaries via SMS (and potentially other sources such as Twitter), and visualising it using a customised Google Map. DRC's Feedback and Accountability System was built by Regional Data Operations Manager Arab Salem, together with Ivanoe Fugali, the CDRD project leader. It used the standard Ushahidi platform to manage and display data, and another Ushahidi product, SMSSync, which allowed it to use an Android-powered smartphone as an SMS gateway to manage the flow of information through the system. This meant an individual beneficiary could text a local Somali number, and immediately receive an automated confirmation SMS. The message would then be accessible to DRC staff through the Ushahidi platform, who would process it and respond accordingly. The text message (and DRC's response) would be posted online (and therefore publicly available) using an interactive map, noting the beneficiary's sex, location, and project but omitting any sensitive information such as their name or number. This online information would be complemented by sharing of information including photos and video through social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter.

There were some constraints associated with using the standardised Ushahidi platform and other products, which meant, for instance, that it was not possible to send and receive SMS messages in bulk (for instance, for carrying out surveys). Other limitations stemmed from the nature of the mobile phone market in Somalia, where geographical limitations and the inability to call between some operators meant a number of different telephone numbers would be needed in different areas. Nonetheless, DRC focused on building a workable (if imperfect) system, which could subsequently be refined and adapted. The system was also designed to require a low level of automation initially – with the SMS needing to be manually tagged and mapped on Ushahidi before being forwarded for action. In addition, apart from the automated response, the follow-up would also be done manually, either via phone or text.

DRC had to consider how the feedback received from beneficiaries would be managed and responded to. It was decided that this element of the feedback mechanism would be managed separately from other project accountability mechanisms, which included a telephone complaints hotline. Where SMS feedback received was flagged as a complaint, it would be referred to the relevant accountability focal point. When positive, neutral, or non-sensitive feedback was

Feedback example 1 – November 2011

Translated SMS: I am a member of Salahlay community. I am requesting the DRC organisation to build a water tank so that the community can have access to clean water. Male beneficiary, Salahlay District

Follow-up:
Step 1: The request was forwarded to DRC field office.

Step 2: The field office sent this response: "According to Salahlay Community Action Plan, we have no extra funds to increase the number of berket [water tank]in Salahlay and your community knew the exact number of berket provided to your district. Thanks for your feedback."

[7] *Ushahidi is an open source project which allows users gather information from a large, unspecified group of people using multiple channels, including SMS, email, Twitter and the internet. Developed in Kenya in 2008 to map the spread of post-election violence in the country, it has been used to crowdsource information in a range of settings, including a number of political and humanitarian crises, notably after the Haiti earthquake.*

[8] *Such information is available online at: http://somcdrd.org/home*

received, this would be manually forwarded to a relevant staff member.

In addition to the feedback system, the second pillar of the project was to harness social media to increase beneficiary engagement with the project, aimed at improving the accountability of a range of stakeholders, including 'horizontal accountability' across actors working in Somalia. To achieve this, information received through the SMS system and presented through the Ushahidi platform was to be supplemented by content in other media, relying on social networks and communities, and building on the experience of the CDRD project online portal.

To roll out the pilot SMS system and social media communications, DRC recruited a Project Communications Officer and a Project Information Officer. In order to be able to moderate discussions on Facebook and Twitter in Somali as well as English and to translate SMS messages, a Somali expatriate was recruited as Project Communication Officer. The Project Information Officer, a Somali national, was tasked with receiving and classifying SMS messages from project beneficiaries, and collecting relevant data, including pictures and videos to be shared through social networks.

A community member in War Idad proudly shows off her mobile phone, which see uses to communicate with friends and family, and contact DRC

Implementation

***Implementation** to produce real examples of change*

DRC's Feedback and Accountability system went live in the latter part of 2011, with the first training and awareness-raising sessions taking place during site visits to CDRD beneficiary communities in Somaliland and Puntland. Staff gave out the SMS number and explained how the feedback system would work. These regular site visits continue to form an essential element of the feedback mechanism.

As the system was rolled out to other areas in 2012, DRC began receiving and responding to feedback from community members, individually and working collectively. Many are positive and express appreciation, while others also ask for increased levels of assistance. Feedback (individual SMS texts) can be viewed online through the Ushahidi platform; messages are tagged by geographic location, and with the information chain, tracing the completion of the feedback loop.

Although many feedback messages are quite simple to process, more complex issues inevitably arise (including allegations of mismanagement and corruption), which both demonstrate and test the ability of the system. Whatever the nature of the feedback, the follow-up process and the response given to the sender is transparent and can be seen online.

The system is proving successful because it allows DRC to provide answers to simple queries that would otherwise go unheard, but also provides an opportunity to reinforce the decision-making and implementation structures within DRC programmes – for example, the community-level project implementation committees. The added value of the online platform is that individual feedback messages can be aggregated and tracked over time, which can generate important information to improve project management (including, for

example, instances where communities appear to know relatively little about programme activities).

However, an early and ongoing concern was the unexpectedly low number of SMS texts received, even as the system was extended to communities across Somaliland and Puntland. In its first three months, the system only received around 50 verifiable SMS texts. There were no clear reasons for this low take-up; did it stem from usability issues, the way the system was being rolled out, or wider issues relating to expectations of accountability and participation in Somali society? As explained below, some new insights have emerged into the possible reasons for the low number of SMS texts following a decision in March 2012 to test the system alongside emergency cash transfers due to be distributed in Mogadishu.

Due to the improving security situation, DRC's Communications Officer for Accountability was able to spend time in Mogadishu, informing cash transfer beneficiaries about how the system works, and giving out the number they needed to text. With a relatively large number of people receiving the cash transfer over a short period of time, there was potential to receive much more feedback through the system.

Figure 2 (below) clearly shows increased use of the system during this period, with more than 150 SMS texts received between March and May 2012 and a clear spike in April. This might be explained by the fact that a large number of beneficiaries were involved and knew about the system and the number to text with any feedback or complaints. But it also highlights a more fundamental point about beneficiary motivations for providing feedback, and how these might differ across different types of programme.

Reflecting on the experience of implementation, a mixed picture emerges. Although the system,

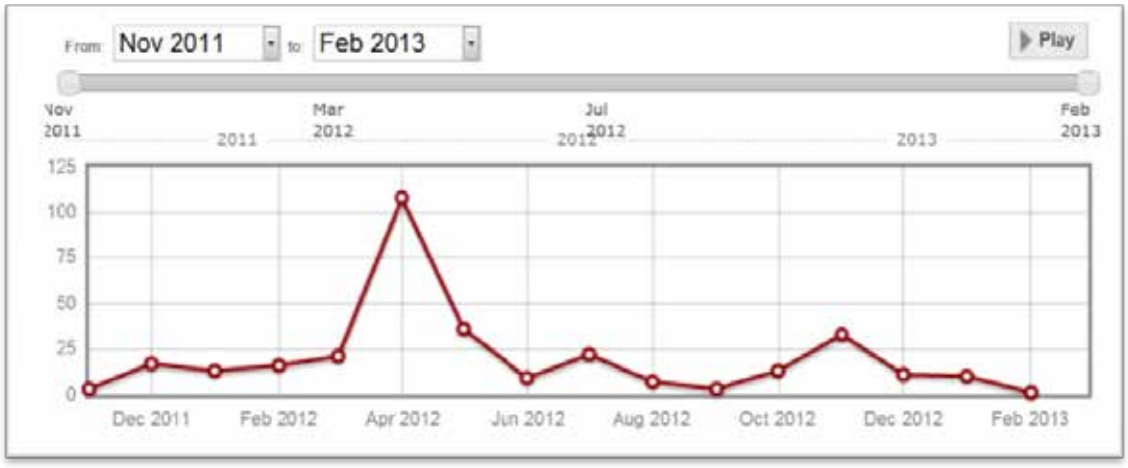

Figure 2: Feedback over time

as implemented in connection with the CDRD programme, has received fewer SMS texts than envisaged, there are clear examples of completed feedback loops. It thus represents a new, easily accessible mechanism for beneficiaries to give feedback and receive a response, thereby strengthening transparency and accountability on the part of DRC. The variation in the nature of feedback received from beneficiaries of different programmes is interesting as it highlights the intrinsic relationship between the innovation and the ongoing programme environment. For example, community participation is central to the CDRD programme, which received relatively few SMS texts with feedback or complaints; by contrast, cash distributions (which prompted many more feedback texts) are more likely to be short-term interventions characterised by limited engagement with beneficiaries. It may be that the success of the broader CDRD programme has, in fact, limited the need for communities to use the SMS system.[9]

The project has experienced various operational and security challenges that

[9] *This is not an argument against this kind of feedback system, which may have benefits merely by being a potential direct and anonymous channel for feedback. It does, however, raise the potential paradox that those high-quality programmes that are most likely to invest in such feedback mechanisms are the programme which needs them least.*

have disrupted the testing of the system. The geographical spread of initial project locations made site visits challenging, exacerbated by general insecurity and specific violent incidents (for instance, the killing of a DRC driver near Caynabo resulted in the suspension of activities and evacuation of some staff). Some operational challenges are common among aid agencies (for example, staff recruitment and retention) while others are specific to the nature of this project, such as the limited resilience of mobile networks in Somalia.

There are two additional problems affecting implementation. First, the decision to build in a low level of automation has made it difficult to aggregate and summarise data (although this decision has resulted in a high degree of granularity (detail) which has helped relevant programme staff gain a good understanding of the feedback received). Second, the desire to maintain a high degree of adaptability has not been capitalised on, as the system has remained unchanged to date.

A solar panel basks in the sun in the village of War Idad, where villagers and pastoralists can stop to charge their phones.

Feedback example 2 – August 2012

Translated SMS: I am one of the residents of Jeyte camp, Waberi, Mogadishu. Are you aware that the money that is provided by DRC was reduced? Previously we used to be provided $118 and now we were given $95. As we are the refugees of Jeyte camp, we appreciate DRC.

Female beneficiary, Waberi, Mogadishu

Follow-up:
Step 1: Complaint logged online and forwarded to Mogadishu team to investigate and send us the findings.

Step 2: The findings from Mogadishu team ("We are aware that, it is $95. The amount was reduced based on the Minimum Expenditure Basket determined by FSNAU [Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit], taking into account that the basic food used for this month and the next coming two months is sorghum instead of rice for the previous payment."

Step 3: The response was relayed to the beneficiary.

Diffusion

Diffusion *of successful innovations - taking them to scale and leading to wider adoption outside the original setting.*

For DRC, the aim of the SMS Feedback and Accountability System was to build a platform that was not only capable of improving its own transparency and accountability but could also be a model for other humanitarian agencies in Somalia and elsewhere looking for ways to make their programming more transparent and responsive to beneficiaries' views and needs. From the outset, raising awareness of the system among other actors was important.

The project has received considerable interest from humanitarian policy actors and news channels, partly reflecting a general interest in applying communications and other new technologies in humanitarian programming, but also a result of the high profile of the ongoing crisis in Somalia. It is perhaps also an unexpected result of efforts to link the project's two pillars – the feedback mechanism and wider engagement with social media.

The external diffusion of the platform is only part of the picture, though. The piloting of the system has played an important part in a wider process of change within DRC across its Horn of Africa and Yemen region programming, as the organisation seeks to operationalise its strategic prioritisation of accountability and transparency. For DRC's Regional Director, the key criterion of success for the pilot is that in two years' time, elements of the system become core components of the agency's standard programme funding agreements.

Now that the HIF grant period has ended, the next step for DRC is to advocate for the system to be used more widely by various multi-agency consortia in Somalia (of which DRC is already a member) and beyond. These include the Somalia Return Consortium, which is likely to fund the adoption of the platform across its members, and the Somalia Cash Consortium, which has also expressed an interest. Although various refinements will be needed, these represent good opportunities to use the learning from the pilot phase to test and improve the platform further for use in different settings.

Community members in remote village of Salahlay check a water storage tank or 'berket'. Using the SMS system they can report any problems directly to DRC.

Wider Implications

This section considers the wider implications of the DRC Feedback and Accountability System for our understanding of innovations in operational humanitarian contexts.

Understanding and mitigating risk

Humanitarian action necessarily takes place in unpredictable, unstable situations and as such is 'defined by risk', be it contextual, institutional or programmatic.[10] Equally, innovation inherently entails a level of risk. Operational humanitarian innovations are thus characterised by a high degree of risk. Understanding this, and identifying ways to mitigate specific risks, should therefore be a priority for those seeking to implement innovations at field level.

DRC's funding proposal identified potential risks, including interference and resistance to local authorities and the malicious use of social media channels. However, a more detailed understanding of potential risks would have been beneficial during implementation. For example, although difficult to mitigate, an understanding that ongoing insecurity posed a risk to programme continuity and the roll-out of the system could have led to a greater ability

[10] *This categorisation, and the phrase 'defined by risk', are taken from Metcalfe V, Martin E, and Pantuliano, S (2011) 'Risk in Humanitarian Action: Towards a common approach?' Humanitarian Policy Group. Available at: www.odi.org.uk/publications/5463-risk-common-action-humanitarian-approach-management 5*

to adapt when programming was suspended – for instance, by embedding information about the system into other activities. Likewise, an understanding of the challenges that low literacy rates among beneficiaries might pose could have led to greater efforts to ensure accessibility.

A further risk factor that was not explicitly recognised or discussed is the apparent low level of technological literacy among those in operational agencies who are potentially users of the system. Many programme staff have only a limited understanding of the technology platform on which the system is based or its relative merits compared to others options. This clearly has implications for the diffusion of the SMS platform among agencies in Somalia, and for the adoption of new communications technology in humanitarian programming more generally.

The importance of adaptability

This case study underlines the importance of building adaptive capacity into the programme and to act on data emerging from monitoring (as DRC did, with the decision to use the system for cash distributions and thus reach a larger beneficiary population). It is notable that DRC decided to build a simple system and platform that required high levels of human engagement so that field staff could more readily learn from the information coming through and make any programming adjustments accordingly.

Although the system was designed to allow for adaptation as the innovation evolved, changes on the ground – specifically related to staffing – meant this did not happen, particularly as problems with the SMS system emerged. As the innovation is extended to consortia operations, a range of adjustments and improvements (for instance, the resilience of the system and the accuracy of the information it presents) are still to be made.

Spaces to experiment can become silos

Another issue raised by this case study relates to the relative merits of providing a protected space for the development of an innovation weighed against the risk of it becoming siloed or disconnected. In this case, the picture is mixed. DRC had carved out space within the CDRD programme for the feedback system to be developed, which meant that it benefited from dedicated staff and resources; but conversely, this limited access to other relevant expertise. Inevitably, whether or not an innovation is developed in some form of protected space, it needs to be normalised and institutionalised to be sustainable in the longer term (indeed, this was the criteria for the system's success, according to DRC's Regional Director).

Challenges associated with using social media

A specific challenge for the DRC project – but one that may well prove relevant for others – relates to the difficulty of successfully and sustainably engaging individuals through social media. DRC had envisaged that by sharing project information through social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter and Flickr, it would be able to generate greater engagement, both within Somalia and from diaspora communities, and build a wider sense of 'horizontal accountability'. However, this has proved perhaps the least successful element of the project. Recognising that success in generating sustainable engagement in such media is not simple (and depends on more than a ready supply of content) may be an important lesson for others undertaking such activities.

Separating actual impact from symbolic impact

There has been sustained interest in DRC's Feedback and Accountability System from the humanitarian policy and information communities. The platform has been featured in various media and policy publications (including IRIN, AlertNet, and BBC Media Action[11]), as well as being presented at a number of conferences and forums. This interest and enthusiasm helps to create 'buzz' around a new idea or practice, which is important for the wider uptake and diffusion of the innovation. But it is necessary to understand and separate the interest and

[11] *IRIN (2012) 'Aid Policy: Accountability in action', 4 July. Available at: www.irinnews.org/Report/95791/AID-POLICY-Accountability-in-action. Danish Refugee Council (2012) 'SMS feedback from DRC aid beneficiaries in Somalia' 12 June. Available at: www.trust.org/item/?map=danish-refugee-council-sms-feedback-from-drc-aid-beneficiaries-in-somalia/; and Wall, I (2012) 'Still Left in the Dark? How people in emergencies use communication to survive – and how humanitarian agencies can help', BBC Media Action Policy Briefing 6. Available at: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/policybriefing/bbc_media_action_still_left_in_the_dark_policy_briefing.pdf*

enthusiasm that stems from the specific qualities of the innovation itself from wider curiosity in novel ideas that advance an area of practice more generally.

This is particularly relevant here for two reasons. First, DRC's innovation focuses on improving the accountability and transparency of humanitarian action, and is part of the organisation's broader efforts to become more transparent and accountable. Given the humanitarian system's continued failure to turn the rhetoric of accountability into substantive change, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is great interest in innovations that offer the possibility of substantial improvements. In this sense, the innovation can be seen as having considerable symbolic impact – both within DRC and beyond. Second, DRC's innovation is an example of a product that is generating interest because it may offer a potential (if partial) solution to a larger, seemingly intractable problem.

Community members in the village of Gadka, discuss the use of the SMS system and how they communicate with DRC as part of the CDRD programme.

Capitalising on and consolidating innovation

Finally, it is encouraging that this innovation is just one of a growing number of initiatives using SMS and other communications technologies to improve the accountability of humanitarian agencies and make them more responsive to beneficiaries' views and needs. As recent research has shown, the explosive growth of mobile phone use provides a real opportunity for humanitarian agencies, and a range of tools and projects have emerged'.[12]

This wellspring of initiatives must now be followed by a period of consolidation, with only the most promising innovations selected for further investment, diffusion and scale-up. In a market system, this process of 'creative destruction' is a consequence of consumer choice. In the humanitarian sector, which lacks such incentives, it must instead be based on the rigorous and impartial assessment of the relative merits of different approaches.

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[12] *Save the Children and the Vodafone Foundation (2012) 'Mobile technology in emergencies: Efficient cash transfer mechanisms and effective two-way communication with disaster-affected communities using mobile phone technology'. Available at: www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/Mobile_Technology.pdf*