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Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities;
The infoasaid-ActionAid Partnership and Communications Initiative in Kenya
Prepared for CDAC Network Media and Tech Fair, March 2012

Introduction

For ActionAid, the concept of communication with disaster affected communities links closely with its human rights based approach. ActionAid sees the purpose of this work as:

- Saving lives and reducing suffering
- Increasing its accountability to rights-holders (the people it works with)
- Empowering communities by facilitating access to the information they need to be able to take decisions, ask questions and demand their rights from duty-bearers. This fosters a sense of active citizenship which helps communities become active agents in the process of change

ActionAid and infoasaid

The partnership between ActionAid and infoasaid began in June 2011 and focuses on three key areas of work:

1. **Mainstreaming communication with crisis affected populations** in ActionAid's organisational thinking, systems, tools and processes around emergency preparedness and response
2. **Training and capacity building** on how to assess the information needs of communities, investigate appropriate communications channels, and craft messages
3. **Piloting a communication response** in two emergency response situations

Projects

Pilot Project in Isiolo, Kenya

The pilot communication project in Isiolo forms part of ActionAid's ongoing three year response to the drought. In Isiolo in Eastern Kenya, ActionAid partners with WFP to provide food to over 90,000 people every month. The programme involves ActionAid staff at the Isiolo office level, Field Monitors (employed by ActionAid to oversee the distribution of food in different communities), Relief Committees (appointed by their community to oversee distribution of food in their community) and community members. Prior to the communication project, the majority of communication between these groups was done through face-to-face meetings.

Setting up the pilot

A research study and baseline review carried out in June 2011 looked at how communities accessed information, and how a communication response might improve communication between the different stakeholders.

At the **community level**, the information needs were for:

- Livestock price information to help achieve better selling prices
- Information relevant to livestock raising activities, including the availability of water and pasture and disease outbreaks
- Information about NGO activities, in particular operational information regarding food distribution
- Food price information to help reduce exploitation through over-priced foodstuffs

On the **ActionAid side**, the communication needs identified were:

- Faster communication with local communities, particularly regarding food distribution activities which are often organised at short notice
- Faster and more systematic data collection and reporting from the field
- Greater and more systematic use of telephone communication with local communities to reduce the amount of staff travel to and from face-to-face meetings

Project details

The project has two key aims:

1. To reduce food insecurity through the provision of relevant and timely information
2. To improve the speed and effectiveness of two-way communication between ActionAid and the local population, and so improve the efficiency of ActionAid's emergency response programme in Isiolo

In order to implement this project, 250 Relief Committee members were provided with basic mobile phones and solar chargers, while 30 ActionAid Field Monitors were provided with java-enabled mobile phones and solar chargers. The project uses multiple channels - <u>Freedom Fone</u>, <u>Frontline SMS</u> and community bulletins - to facilitate communication flow and data collection between the different groups involved:

Information from ActionAid to communities:

- On a weekly basis, ActionAid staff in Isiolo send information on livestock prices in Isiolo town market (sourced from the Ministry of Livestock) and the cost of staple food commodities in Isiolo town (sourced from the Ministry of Agriculture) via SMS to all 250 Relief Committee members, who then transcribe the information to a community bulletin and post it in a prominent place in the community. The bulletins have additional space for other news and vital key messages.
- The project also uses Freedom Fone to transmit the same information through recorded voice messages, which has the benefit of being accessible for people who are illiterate. The phone line has an answerphone service where people can leave messages about issues of interest or concern, which ActionAid then follows up on.

Information from communities to ActionAid:

- Communities are able to leave voicemail messages on the Freedom Fone answerphone service, as well as send text messages through Frontline SMS direct to ActionAid Food Monitors and staff in the Isiolo office. They have used this to report outbreaks of animal and human disease, weather patterns and rainfall, and security incidents.

Data collection and information management:

- Food Monitors also use the SMS system to report back to ActionAid on how food distributions have gone via special 'text forms' on their java-enabled mobiles. This enables faster data collection and easier information management regarding key aspects of the distributions.

What Worked and Why?

Key achievements

A review of the project took place in October 2011 and identified areas of success as follows:

- At the community level, the project has enabled people to plan better based on the information they receive on food and livestock prices. In several cases, people had sent money to relatives in Isiolo to buy food staples where the bulletins had revealed a big differential between the price of commodities in Isiolo town and their local community. The phones are also being used by community members to receive remittances from relatives in the diaspora.
- The project has opened up a direct channel of communication between the communities and ActionAid, which did not exist previously, and which has increased dialogue between the two actors.
- Food Monitors report that the use of Frontline SMS has reduced the need for frequent travel to rural communities for face-to-face meetings – in one case from 24 per month to just 12 – thus saving time and money.
- The project has facilitated more efficient communication regarding the dates and times of food distribution, and proved a faster and more efficient channel for collecting data from the field.

What Didn't Work and Why?

Key challenges

The review highlighted the following obstacles:
- Technology problems presented significant challenges in terms of software and also with solar chargers for the mobile phones provided to community members.
- The Freedom Fone communication channel has not been as successful as the Frontline SMS channel. Whilst this may in part be due to the limited advertising of the Freedom phone number, it is also attributable to the social preference for using SMS over phone lines.
- Lack of senior leadership buy-in at country level (at least in the initial stages, mainly due to competing priorities) limited the speed at which the project was able to get up and running.
- The project design and implementation suffered from a lack of sufficient mechanisms and capacity for addressing community feedback, particularly feedback that doesn't concern ActionAid activities.

Recommendations

The review made a number of recommendations to improve the overall effectiveness of the project:
- ActionAid programme managers in Isiolo should take a more active role in the communications project. They should provide strategic direction to ensure that ActionAid is always communicating the most important and relevant information to the local population.
- ActionAid should develop an effective mechanism for responding to issues raised by the population of Isiolo County that do not directly concern the agency's own programmes, such as reports of disease outbreaks, cattle rustling and shortages of seed to plant. In particular ActionAid should share such information in a timely manner with member organisations of the District Steering Groups in Isiolo and Garba Tulla districts.
- ActionAid should invite members of the District Steering Group to participate in an exchange of important information related to the humanitarian situation in Isiolo County by SMS message via the ActionAid Frontline SMS hub.
- ActionAid should consider widening the project to deliver livestock and food commodity price information direct to members of the public by SMS via the Frontline SMS hub in Isiolo. This would pilot a new channel for communicating regular information to key individuals in disaster-affected communities.

Lessons Learnt

The project has highlighted a number of strategic and operational considerations critical to the success of initiatives focused on communicating with disaster-affected communities:
- Undertake a thorough assessment and baseline review of the current communication landscape, including the communication preferences of target audiences, to ensure any communication project meets the genuine needs of those audiences and is delivered via a channel they trust and will use. As with any other humanitarian programme, a strong baseline enables the project impact to be established.
- Ensure senior management buy-in: this is essential to ensuring adequate resourcing and paving the way for future roll out.
- Ensure adequate human resources to manage effectively communication systems and handle community feedback. This is particularly important in managing the expectations of the communities you are working with.
- Provide training as a core element of the project inception. Staff involved in information dissemination and collection may require training on specific software applications and on information management.
- Map actors involved and engage them in the project from the start to ensure linkages with relevant service providers on issues raised by communities which do not relate directly to your own agency's programming.

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- Document and share learning and case studies demonstrating the project's impact - monitoring, evaluating and capturing learning is essential for both internal lobbying within humanitarian organisations and externally to donors, for the need to prioritise and resource this work.

For more information on the Isiolo project see www.actionaid.org/stories/frontline-sms-pastoralists-check-stock-prices-their-mobiles or visit www.actionaid.org/what-we-do/emergencies-conflict