

Case study: BRC and SMS communication in rural areas

After the earthquake, the British Red Cross (BRC) established a programme to subsidise the school fees of 8,000 children displaced by the earthquake to the southern rural area of Les Cayes. After assessing families to see if they qualified, BRC faced the problem of communicating its decision to the many thousands of families involved. These were mostly scattered across a large area and involved many different schools. BRC staff had recorded the phone numbers of all participants during the assessment (including designated community leaders where people did not have phones), and the team decided to use SMS as the only way to simultaneously inform everyone of the decision.

To prepare, the team explained to the schools that this was how the announcement would be made. Aware that parents would have subsequent questions, the team told recipients that they should contact schools for further information and worked with the schools to prepare them, providing information packs, posters, beneficiary lists and full details of the selection criteria. They also made sure that a BRC staff member would be in the schools to handle the next stage of the project once the SMS went out.

The SMS told those selected for assistance to go immediately to the school. It was timed to go out at a time when parents would be able to travel and the schools would be able to handle the follow up. Immediately after the SMS was sent, people began arriving at schools.

According to project staff, the SMS worked because it avoided the time-consuming and expensive alternative of travelling to every community to share the news. It also helped ensure transparency and equity by making certain that everyone got the news at the same time. It worked well because it was part of a communication system: it was carefully timed and organised, plans were in place for handing follow up, and the SMS was carefully phrased to direct families on what to do next. "It still takes a lot of work to set it up and support it. But it worked really well. It was amazing how many people even in remote rural areas had phones," said a BRC staff member.