

## Case study: IFRC, Voila and public/private telecoms sector partnerships

The most comprehensive and successful partnership between aid providers and a telecoms company to emerge from Haiti is that between the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and local provider Trilogy International Partners, who owns the Voila network in Haiti. The first IFRC beneficiary communication delegate, Will Rogers, was deployed to Haiti within days of the disaster by the Irish Red Cross. He immediately began looking for partnerships to implement large-scale SMS information work, building on pioneering work by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Aceh a few years previously. Voila agreed to give IFRC, along with several other organisations, open access to their subscriber base to provide information to survivors. When spamming and abuse of the system forced Voila to restrict access, IFRC remained a partner.

Broadly speaking, the partnership between IFRC and Voila ensured access to the overall subscriber base for IFRC, and a strong corporate social responsibility model for Voila, which also led to the development of software that may have some commercial value for the company. Crucially, Voila allowed IFRC to use existing systems that track phone traffic by tower, meaning that IFRC was able to target information to geographically relevant areas rather than just the entire network. This was not straightforward for Voila, given their obligation to protect customer data.

The partnership between Voila and IFRC led to a nationwide SMS system, called the Trilogy Emergency Response Application (TERA). TERA was originally designed to support disaster risk reduction work by helping Haitians prepare for hurricanes and by providing early warning alerts by SMS.<sup>1</sup> However, TERA is now used by IFRC to also deliver information assistance as part of project communication strategies<sup>2</sup> and to carry out impact surveys and collect data<sup>3</sup>.

Perhaps most significantly, the SMS system played a vital role in the response to cholera, providing a key conduit to share information about symptoms, prevention and treatment within minutes, on a national scale, and alerting all subscribers to the information on cholera provided by a free information line (see next below).

In addition to SMS, the IFRC/Voila partnership also led to the establishment of a free automated information line, \*733, which could be used to provide basic recorded information on any current issue. Topics covered so far included advice on preparing for hurricane season, details of services for rape survivors, cholera awareness, and information about IFRC's transitional shelter programme.

<sup>1</sup> The SMS system was conceptualised as a hurricane awareness project, anticipating the hurricane season later in 2010, but was actually used first in a vaccination and water and sanitation campaign as part of the emergency response. Its use in the context of hurricane awareness came later.

<sup>2</sup> For example, by alerting rape survivors to gender-based violence services, telling parents whether their application for school fee support was successful etc.

<sup>3</sup> To assess which items in a hygiene kit are most useful and to find shelter recipients who are interested in receiving educational or vocational training as part of a livelihoods project, for instance.

Additional benefits for IFRC included the system's ability to capture data regarding use and response to the service.

The number was hugely popular: From January to June 2011, 128,195 people called the line. Almost 50,000 of these calls were made following an SMS advertising the line in June as part of a hurricane preparedness campaign.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the IFRC/Voila project is that it led to the development of pioneering SMS software and a technical model, including contracting modalities. This means the same system could be set up anywhere in the world with a local partner. IFRC and parent company Trilogy are now in a global-level agreement to continue this work – a first for both organisations. Most recently, IFRC and Haitian Red Cross have secured funding to introduce an Interactive Voice Response service to the TERA system. This will not only allow people to listen to recorded information but also take part in surveys using the keypad on their phone. There is considerable further potential in this area, as automating data collection is technically not a difficult process, although IFRC will have to resource the capacity to manage and analyse information. This has very exciting implications for improved monitoring and evaluation, and for beneficiary participation, both for SMS/phone line projects themselves (who uses them, how, why and when, and what sorts of information generate the greatest response), and also as a data collection method in its own right for other projects.