

Delivering Food Aid to Iraqi Refugees (Syria)

Issue: Alerting Refugees to Food Aid Deliveries

Beneficiaries of the United Nations (UN) World Food Programme (WFP) are the poorest of the poor. As the frontline agency mandated to combat global hunger—and entirely reliant on voluntary funding—WFP must make stark choices about whom it can provide with food assistance. This year, WFP aims to assist 73 million people in 78 countries—knowing that there are a staggering 850 million hungry people worldwide.

About two million Iraqis have fled their country since 2003, and an additional 60,000 are leaving each month.¹⁶ Syria has received the majority of these refugees and there are now an estimated 1.4 million Iraqis in Syria. The WFP has estimated that about 50,000 of the Iraqis in Syria need food aid.

Every month at distribution centers and warehouses of the Syrian Red Crescent, the WFP and Syrian Red Crescent provide eligible refugee families with basic food commodities, such as rice, lentils, and oil, and complementary items, such as sugar, tea, pasta, tomato paste, and bulgur.

Charged with coordinating these distributions, WFP alerts eligible families about food rations and directs them to the appropriate distribution centers. Previously, the WFP had used local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who work with refugees to help get the word out. Since not all eligible families had regular contact with local NGOs, however, a new strategy was



Credit: WFP/John Wreford

needed. To facilitate this process, the UN agency recently instituted a text messaging program to notify refugees about the availability of food aid.

Response: Using Text Messaging to Communicate News of Food Supplies

With a responsibility for coordinating the logistics and emergency communications for other UN agencies and NGOs, WFP is constantly looking for innovative ways of stretching its donations to benefit as many people as possible. The Iraqi beneficiaries described in the case study are far from typical in that they have access to mobile telephones.

Describing the genesis of the project, Haitham El Noush, program officer at WFP Damascus, says: “Last year we started distributing food to refugees in Damascus. But how were we going to announce distribution? We wanted to alert about 6,000 families in a pilot project when food was ready for pick-up. Someone in the office came up with the idea to use a text messaging service to alert these families.”

¹⁶al-Khalidi, Ashraf, Sophia Hoffman, and Victor Tanner. *Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic: A Field-Based Snapshot* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution–University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement, 2007).

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In August 2007, WFP's program in Damascus contacted one of the mobile telephone operators in the country, to inquire about covering a portion of the costs of the text messaging. The operator agreed to provide an initial 800 text messages at no cost. El Noush notes: "The idea was new; this was the first time this was ever done. And it was simple: We sent a text message to people on our list to go to the distribution site and receive the food."

To bring the text message pilot program to scale, the WFP set up an account with a mobile marketing vendor to accommodate their bulk messaging needs. WFP buys text messages in bulk to secure a volume discount, and uses a list of phone numbers provided by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to target its food distribution alerts. WFP manages and distributes messages using a do-it-yourself dashboard on the mobile vendor's website. The message that is delivered to refugees provides a URL (uniform resource locator) where potential food aid recipients can verify whether they are eligible for food benefits.

Challenges: Reaching the Right Recipients with the Right Information

One of the limits of a program like this is that the messaging is only as targeted as the phone numbers on the contact list. Because people switch phone numbers or share phones, delivery of a message to an intended recipient is not always assured, especially in a sometimes chaotic environment. As a result, during the first month of the program, some messages were delivered to people not eligible for food aid, who were subsequently turned away at the distribution center.

El Noush notes that, "people thought the text message was like an entitlement and then showed up and wanted the food but had to be turned down." Learning this lesson, recipients are now directed to a website to make sure that they are indeed eligible.



Credit: WFP/John Wreford

However, says El Noush, even though "there are lots of internet cafes and people can have easy internet access, we still cannot be 100 percent sure that we don't exclude some people by this extra step. At the same time, text messaging really is the most effective way to reach people—everyone has a mobile phone and by sending some 35,000 messages we got a lot of visibility about the program." UNHCR is now asking individuals picking up food to update their phone number at the distribution center in the hope that this will reduce errors over time and ensure a more accurate list of numbers.

Another challenge of texting is the limited space—especially in Arabic. While a text message in English can accommodate 160 characters, a text message in Arabic can hold only 70. With such limited space, messages must be very clear to be understood by the recipient.

Outcome: Improved Awareness and Targeting of Food Aid

The initial distribution of text messages to 800 families was successful in reaching targeted recipients of food aid, and the program expanded rapidly. In the first six months of operation in 2007, WFP sent out about 35,000 text messages to 140,000 eligible people—approximately one message per registered family.

While some text messages went to people not eligible for food, most were successfully delivered and the families expressed gratitude and appreciation. Says El Noush, “The text messages have the side effect of creating news in the city by word of mouth. We are finding the program to be very effective. You give good news to people on their mobiles. People reported that they felt happy when they received the text messages from us, and told us that they felt that someone cares about them.”



Credit: WFP/John Wreford

Next Steps: Bringing the Food Aid Alert Model to Scale

WFP’s food aid text message alert program has grown rapidly. The first effort reached about 6,600 people through some 800 messages; approximately one message per phone number available for each family. The second round of messaging targeted some 30,000 individuals. At the time of publication, the WFP’s list had grown to include more than 142,000 Iraqi refugees in Syria that it is reaching via text messaging. The target for 2008 is to notify a total of 362,000 Iraqi refugees in Syria about the availability of food aid.

Although this program has yet to be replicated elsewhere, the WFP is excited about the potential of the program. When conditions permit, as in the case of Iraqi refugees in Syria, communicating with large groups via text messaging can provide targeted delivery of essential information—including where one might find one’s next meal. ■