

Text Messaging as a Violence-Prevention Tool (Kenya)

Issue: Providing Real-Time Information in Times of Crisis

Following the December 2007 presidential election in Kenya, waves of political and ethnic violence swept the country. The election, which returned President Mwai Kibaki to office, was marred by widespread allegations of vote rigging. To help stem the violence, human rights advocates in the country quickly mobilized by creating a text messaging ‘nerve center.’ That center served as a vital tool for conflict management and prevention by providing a hub for real-time information about actual and planned attacks between rival ethnic and political groups. The text messages, sent in by human rights advocates, religious leaders, and others, were then relayed to local Peace Committees for response.

The initiative was funded by Oxfam Great Britain (Oxfam-GB)—a development, advocacy, and relief agency—as part of its emergency response. Oxfam-GB has employed several text messaging strategies as it develops its knowledge and evaluates the effectiveness of that platform as a fundraising, awareness-building, and advocacy tool.

Response: Connecting Communities in Crisis through Mobile Communications

As part of its emergency response during the crisis in Kenya, Oxfam-GB provided financial support to PeaceNet, an umbrella body made up of Kenyan organizations and individuals dedicated to human rights, peace, and justice.

“Before the elections, PeaceNet was gathering information around Kenya to make sure nothing went awry,” explains Philippa Crosland Taylor, Oxfam Country Programme

Manager in Kenya. “After the election, they decided it would be valuable to have people text into a nerve center, which could then pass information along to relevant authorities and the police. Sometimes if you put a few policemen or elders in place, you can prevent something unfortunate from happening.”

Oxfam-GB’s contribution of roughly £36,000 was used to support PeaceNet’s field operations and headquarters costs during the crisis. Oxfam-GB also used its connections to negotiate a deal with Celtel, the second largest mobile phone network in Kenya, to halve its ordinary rates for those transmitting and receiving messages through the text message ‘nerve center.’

Outcome: Communicating by Mobile Phone to Avert Crisis

Through facilitating emergency communications, PeaceNet’s text message ‘nerve center’ was able to prevent violent incidents in the weeks and months following the election. For example, in the city of Eldoret, PeaceNet mobilized local non-governmental organization (NGO) and religious leaders to form Peace Committees to offer early warning of violent activity and to serve as intermediaries. When one local citizen learned of a pending attack against a camp for internally displaced people, a text alert was sent to the text message ‘nerve center.’ It, in turn, alerted the Peace Committee in Eldoret, which took steps to avert the attack.

During another instance, following the murder of a member of the Kenyan Parliament, a group of young people made plans to attack residents of a particular ethnic community. Once the ‘nerve center’ was alerted, it notified Peace Committee members who persuaded the youth to go home.



Credit: Tom Baldwin/Oxfam

“In the wake of a government ban on live broadcasting of incidences of violence, the SMS Center became a lifeline for informa-

tion by linking Nairobi to incidences as they happened on the ground,” says Barasa Mang’eni, PeaceNet-Kenya program officer. “The initiative encouraged local level dialogue and mediation to stop violence and facilitated communication to security forces, the Kenya Red Cross, and UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Civil society actors were linked to peace processes at the community level, enabling them to contribute to nonviolence advocacy.”

Challenges: Diverting Time, Attention, and Expertise to New Outreach Efforts

While encouraged by the successes of the text message ‘nerve center’ in preventing violence

A Mobile Advocacy Case Study: The Make Poverty History Campaign

In 2005, Oxfam-GB launched a text message-based outreach initiative as part of its role in the Make Poverty History Campaign. Make Poverty History, an alliance of United Kingdom charities, advocacy groups, and faith-based organizations, set out to mobilize people to support the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, the largest anti-poverty movement in the world, representing more than 150 million people in over 100 countries.

Advertisements were placed on several campaign websites and in newspapers urging people to text the keyword “BAND” to receive a white wristband, the global campaign’s symbol. Users would then receive an automatic response requesting their name, street number, and postal code. Oxfam-GB benefited from the fact that they were able to use a shared short code, provided by a mobile marketing solutions provider, to facilitate the campaign. Approximately 50,000 people ordered their white band through the Oxfam text messaging campaign. Users were charged £1.50 per text conversation to cover packaging and postage costs, taxes, and network and aggregator fees.

While Oxfam-GB relied on a shared short code for its White Band appeal, it has since purchased a dedi-



cated short code. It is currently using the code to encourage people to sign up for various campaigns or set up a regular gift. For example, individuals can text in to receive updates on actions they can take and events related to issues like climate change. “The beauty of texting is its immediacy,” says Pierino Cioffi, marketing and communications officer for Oxfam-GB. “We believe nearly all text messages get read.” Emails sent by charities and commercial players in the United Kingdom, on the other hand, have an open rate of roughly 20 percent, he adds.

A valuable byproduct of the campaign was the collection of names and phone numbers to be used in future outreach efforts. Oxfam-GB continues to send text message alerts about public demonstrations and fundraising appeals to several thousand of its white band responders who agreed to receive future announcements.



in Kenya, and its text message outreach efforts related to the Make Poverty History campaign, Oxfam-GB emphasizes that its use of mobile applications remains in the preliminary stages, and has yet to develop into a cohesive strategy for employing mobile applications in the future. Part of the challenge lies in developing the necessary expertise. Oxfam-GB relied heavily on a mobile marketing firm for support and advice during the White Band campaign.

Oxfam-GB's experience in using text messaging as an awareness-building tool mirrors that of many NGOs. Because text message-based advocacy is relatively new, expertise is limited and few successful case studies exist. Set-up costs are also a big factor. Particularly in the area of fundraising via text messages, those NGOs that have claimed successes tend to be well known and represent causes that elicit an emotional response that drives people to take immediate action.

Mobile Fundraising: Supporting Disaster Victims in the United States

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the United States, the Wireless Foundation partnered with the American Red Cross to develop a mechanism through which citizens could make fast, easy donations. In just two months, more than US \$100,000 was raised for the American Red Cross to assist hurricane victims. Realizing this arrangement could help victims of future natural disasters, the partnering organizations established a permanent text messaging response system.

The result was Text 2HELP™. Through the program, customers of participating wireless carriers simply text message “2HELP” (24357), with the keyword “GIVE,” to make a \$5.00 donation to the American Red Cross Disaster Relief Fund to support relief efforts in the event of a large-scale disaster.

The amount appears on the customer's bill, or is debited from prepaid account balances, with 100 percent of the donation amount going to relief efforts. Those using the

service are charged the customary fee for transmitting a text message. Individuals are able to make up to four \$5.00 donations on their account at a time.

Text 2HELP™ is made available in the event of a large-scale national disaster. In February 2007, for example, the program was activated to raise support for tornado victims in central Florida. It was activated again during the wildfires in California in late 2007. Funds were used to provide food, shelter, counseling, and other assistance.

The American Red Cross is part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, a global network of over 180 national societies that work to restore hope and dignity to the world's most vulnerable people. Established in 1881, the American Red Cross provides fast relief to victims of natural disasters and helps people to prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergency situations.

Next Steps: Increasing Organizational Reach through Mobile Phones

Looking ahead, Cioffi is encouraged by the potential for people to be able to make donations via the Internet on mobile phones that are wireless access protocol (WAP)-enabled. “From our point of view,” says Cioffi, “we see mobiles as a way that people can spontaneously donate. If they see a billboard or a poster, they can do so right away.”

Text messaging has emerged as an increasingly powerful tool in humanitarian crises—helping to disseminate life-saving information, providing critical news updates, and mobilizing people to make donations to help those in need. As the use of mobile phones keeps expanding, the power and reach of these strategies will only continue to grow. ■

Text Messages Received by the ‘Nerve Center’ About Election-Related Violence in January 2008

“We have been alerted that it is not safe tonight, in Bamburi, Utange, home area. We are asking 4 security here please.”

“Over 400 people with no food or water holed in Huruma PCEA church in Eldoret for three days. Help needed immediately.”

“I humbly ask for security in the church we are in, Elgon view, Eldoret as we have heard of the killings in the Kiambaa church.”

“People evicted from their homes in Saboti, are starving no basic needs, food, blankets, etc. People are camping at Kiungani, Kiminini and Sikhendu Kitale.”

“People fleeing to Kitale from Gitwamba (very serious) torching of houses, lootings, etc. RED CROSS if possible, should assist.”

“The situation in Narok south is bad. People have camped at the catholic church in Mulot and there are fears that they may be attacked tonight.”