

# LOW-COST MOBILE-ENABLED FEEDBACK MECHANISM FOR SOLICITED AND UNSOLICITED FEEDBACK

## BACKGROUND

This beneficiary feedback approach sought to build on and test examples of beneficiary feedback and communication that utilised increasingly widespread mobile technology. It envisioned an SMS-based feedback system which would provide 24 hour access to a two-way feedback mechanism. In the inception phase, based on the expectation that literacy would be a barrier to feedback, this approach was broadened to include registration of missed calls to the helpline number, which would then be called back by the project Community Feedback Officer (CFO). A literature review prepared by SIMLab at the outset of the project outlines the examples of such feedback mechanisms, and their potential and likely challenges.<sup>1</sup>

Partners were trained by SIMLab to use FrontlineCloud<sup>2</sup> (an online platform that allows you to manage SMS and missed calls passing through a linked Android smartphone connected to the internet). The CFO was required to manage and maintain the FrontlineCloud system, respond to text messages and missed calls, and enter feedback into the internal feedback system. The Frontline team were commissioned to build missed-call recognition into FrontlineCloud, and produced the new FrontlineSync Android application to make this possible.

As with all the approaches, suggestion boxes would be made available to support another form of solicited and unsolicited feedback. Community meetings and information boards would provide information on project activities and would share responses to individual and overall feedback. In all cases, the community were consulted on where to place noticeboards and feedback boxes, how the mechanisms would be publicised and where and how feedback would be shared back to the community.

This approach was implemented in Hargeisa, Somaliland, by Health Poverty Action (HPA) and in Iringa, Tanzania, by CUAMM Trustees (CUAMM). CINI, in Kolkata, India, started with this approach but felt that requiring their largely female staff to take telephone calls would expose them to sexual harassment, and shifted to an alternative, beneficiary-led approach where mobile was excluded as a feedback channel.

## KEY ASSUMPTIONS

In designing the mobile-enabled Beneficiary Feedback Mechanism (BFM) approach, the consortium documented their assumptions that

- where accessible, mobile technology exists, mobile can be an effective, efficient and equitable mechanism for obtaining feedback;
- those without phones would borrow them, and illiterate people would use intermediaries to write text messages and suggestion box feedback. The Somaliland context analysis indicated that the use of intermediaries was accepted practice, and those unable to use the written BFM would still be able to give feedback using voice calls and community meetings
- the system would be fast and responsive<sup>3</sup>
- all BFMs in this approach would be confidential, and could be anonymous or attributed at the beneficiary's discretion
- feedback would be unstructured, and both solicited and unsolicited. This would allow beneficiaries 'control of what they decide to give feedback on, ensuring quality feedback that is a true reflection of project performance and impact'<sup>4</sup>, and allow feedback from those not benefiting from the project.
- the mobile-enabled approach would be the low-cost option. It was predicted that the use of technology would result in 'time resources at least halved for implementation and reporting for a feedback mechanism compared to use of a non-digital data collection mechanism – data entry is removed, but is received and inputted into a computer simultaneously, reducing time and error. Data can then be exported for analysis.'<sup>5</sup>

It was understood that the proportion of the population who would give feedback would vary in each area, which would impact the resources in airtime and staff time required to maintain the system, and the ability of the CFO to respond to feedback.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hudson, L. SMS-based Accountability to Beneficiaries Mechanisms in Humanitarian Aid and Development, ICTD 2013, Dec 07-10 2013, Cape Town, South Africa

<sup>2</sup> <http://product.frontlinesms.com>

<sup>3</sup> Approach Design document, para. 46

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 65

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 65

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 67

## THE CONTEXT ASSESSMENT PHASE AND TARGET PROGRAMMES

During the context assessment phase, local capacity was tested to assess 'the knowledge and culture of mobile phone use, literacy, mobile network coverage in the target area, and levels of mobile phone ownership among the target population'. The reports concluded that, in the Approach One countries, 'a significant number of the community have access to a mobile phone including the most vulnerable', and 'communities have the knowledge to use and send SMS or to use voice calls.'<sup>7</sup> Although the reports assessed low levels of literacy among the target beneficiaries, the assessments suggested that the community were supportive of the mobile approach and would be able to use it.

### Health Poverty Action, Hargeisa, Somaliland

Health Poverty Action is an international health-focused NGO, which works "to strengthen poor and marginalised people in their struggle for health". In Somaliland, HPA until recently were supported by GPAF to support health centres in Hargeisa, focusing on serving internally displaced people and pastoralist populations. The project aimed to improve maternal, neonatal and child health status in the Maroodi Jeex region of Somaliland, supporting maternity work at Hargeisa Group Hospital, 11 health facilities and included a child and newborn care component. The project targeted 116,744 internally displaced women of child-bearing age, 10,116 infants and 50,580 children under five years. The BFM Pilot planned to solicit feedback from both targeted beneficiaries (adults), health workers and indirect beneficiaries (other community members in IDP settlements).<sup>8</sup>

The project was initially assessed as suitable to use the mobile technology feedback approach following discussions with HPA and review of secondary data which highlighted relatively high levels of mobile phone ownership, use and good network coverage. Among the targeted beneficiary group, although phone ownership was low, access was reported as high, meaning that women would be able to use someone else's phone to give feedback, and focus group discussions (FGDs) indicated that it was culturally acceptable for women to use phones for this purpose.<sup>9</sup> The project also noted previous and existing SMS-based projects in Somaliland.<sup>10</sup> The context analysis revealed high levels of adult illiteracy, particularly among women, but focus group discussions uncovered that this is changing, with younger people helping their parents to send text messages and generally having higher literacy.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the literacy issues, the community and HPA staff reported using SMS often and due to the pricing of SMS and voice calls in the market, the team concluded that SMS was likely to be preferable to calls. As access to electricity was raised as a barrier to using phones, HPA installed solar panels at some clinics.<sup>12</sup> As is common in frontier mobile markets, none of the three phone companies were able to connect cross-network calls, but as most people in the targeted areas used Telesom, this was not seen as a challenge.

### CUAMM Trustees, Iringa, Tanzania

CUAMM Trustees is a long-term implementer in the Morogoro and Iringa Regions of Tanzania, and its current DFID GPAF project "Access to safe delivery 2012-16" was the subject of this pilot. The project improves the availability and quality of district mother and newborn health services and utilisation through the empowerment of local communities. Direct beneficiaries are women of childbearing age (approximately 65,000 in Iringa district, and 84,000 in Mufindi) and their newborns (around 8600 in Iringa district and 4800 in Mufindi).<sup>13</sup>

Here, too, the mobile technology feedback approach was thought appropriate. Review of secondary data and discussion with CUAMM similarly highlighted relatively high levels of mobile phone ownership and network compared to other Pilot sites, sufficient literacy to use SMS and the success of other SMS-based initiatives.<sup>14</sup> Although some areas in the pilot region did not have good mobile coverage, the pilot was able to exclude them without unduly jeopardising the results of the pilot. The context assessment indicated that there were risks relating to 'access to a mobile phone, suitable literacy level and available credit, but 'focus group discussions with communities placed all these risks as low compared to the risks of confidentiality or personal risk from providing negative feedback either from their husbands or health workers.<sup>15</sup> 'The report noted that risks posed by the cost of text messaging 'are relatively low as mobile usage is high, SMS costs are low and credit is obtained in bundles which includes a certain number of free SMS and calls.<sup>16</sup> 'The community requested that a voice option be added at context assessment stage.

In this project, an explicit interest, given the disproportionate power rated by the community as being in the hands of indirect beneficiaries, specifically men, was to examine 'what potential impact feedback from powerful 'influencers' of direct beneficiaries can have on the design and implementation of the programme'. It was noted that men were more likely to be able to access phones and might use the SMS service, both at context assessment and MTR phases.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 47

<sup>8</sup> BFM Country-level Design HPA Somaliland, 3.2

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 4.4

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 3.1

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 4.1

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>13</sup> BFM Country level design outline CUAMM Tanzania 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 8.1

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 8.6

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 8.4

<sup>17</sup> Tanzania Mid-term report, 3.1 'Has the Context Changed'

## SETTING UP THE BFM IN TANZANIA AND SOMALILAND

In February 2014, SIMLab staff and World Vision delivered two days of training in both pilot contexts to the CFOs and their team. Training included sensitising staff to the principles of accountability to beneficiaries and feedback mechanisms; some participatory exercises relating to the use of technology in their communities (which helped inform SIMLab's advice), set-up of the system and hardware, and hands-on training for the CFO and other staff members on the software itself.

FrontlineCloud accounts were set up for each CFO under a new Gmail address created specifically for the purpose. The staff member used their existing laptop, and Android phones purchased in Nairobi, Kenya were supplied by SIMLab. The project covered the costs of the FrontlineCloud subscription (\$US25 per month) and airtime costs for phone calls and text messaging.

As the FrontlineSync Android application was developed and rolled out specifically for this project, in February 2014 the CFOs were trained to use a 'beta' version of the app which was downloaded via a link supplied by the Frontline team, and installed through a slightly more complex set of steps than normal. Both CFOs were able to install updated applications with some help from SIMLab over Skype, and by May 2014 the FrontlineSync app was released and available via the Google Play store. Subsequent to this, updates to the app were automatic. Some issues were observed with the application's syncing with the FrontlineCloud server being disrupted by interruptions in data connectivity, which was resolved by keeping the phone in one place and on the office wifi, and restarting the application when this occurred.

Software support for the CFOs was through three known sources - 1) the World Vision team; 2) via Skype from the SIMLab team, and 3) for bug reporting and technical problems which could not be resolved by trouble-shooting, support via the FrontlineCloud help-desk website, which provides interactive message-based support and full documentation.

When a beneficiary called the FrontlineSync Android phone, and the call was not answered, FrontlineCloud registered the call and the person received a call back from the CFO, usually on the same or the following business day. Text messages were replied to in the same way, and at HPA, an automated reply was set up and sent in response to all text messages received.<sup>18</sup>

The CUAMM Project Manager observed during the endline interviews that the software was useful, although its potential capacity was underused by the low volume of feedback received. He noted the potential efficiency of the software, including in capturing feedback in a format which could be exported, via CSV (comma-separated value) file, to Excel for review. At HPA, although training was provided, the CFO entered calls and SMS messages into another feedback Excel database manually. This may have been because the export function was poorly understood, or because given the small volume of data and the number of steps involved in manipulating data to go from one spreadsheet to another, it may have felt easier just to manually retype the information. Despite this, the CFO noted during the endline Key Informant Interview (KII) that Frontline made it easy to find and review feedback, suggesting that she found the interface easy to use.

## LEARNING FROM THE PILOTS

By the time of CUAMM Tanzania's mid-term review, 76% of all feedback was received through suggestion boxes, with only 16.5% and 13.5% coming from SMS and voice calls, respectively. Use of the mobile-enabled channels as a proportion of feedback received dropped off significantly over the course of the project, to 6.5% (SMS) and 4.6% (voice).<sup>20</sup> Of those who did provide feedback through these channels, a disproportionate number were men – particularly in cases relating to gender-based violence, where 67% of SMS respondents are male, compared to 58% of suggestion box respondents.<sup>21</sup>

At HPA, the toll-free line had by the end of the pilot become the most popular channel, receiving around 120-130 of the 150-200 pieces of feedback over the final three months of the pilot.<sup>22</sup> For the year prior to this, the suggestion box had been by far the most popular beneficiary feedback mechanism. Gender-disaggregated data was not included in the end-line report.

The design and context assessment phases set up certain assumptions. We will examine them in turn.

### ***Assumption: 'where accessible, mobile technology exists, mobile can be an effective, efficient and equitable mechanism for obtaining feedback'***

Mobile coverage did not differ substantially from that expected, but meaningful access - the ability to borrow or buy and make use of a phone - seems to have been lower. The CUAMM endline beneficiary survey revealed that of those who replied that they could not send an SMS, 57.9% cited access to a phone and 33.3% that SMS was too expensive.<sup>23</sup> Contrary to the positive messages received at context assessment, in Somaliland MCH staff at end-line reported feeling surprise that SMS was to be one of the feedback channels, although the concerns among beneficiaries were reduced (but not eliminated) by the addition of a toll-free line. The CUAMM Project Manager, in a KII during the endline study, noted that he feared they had designed a project 'for the middle class of the village and not the poorest.'<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> BFM Country-level Design HPA Somaliland, 5.5

<sup>19</sup> This is not normal practice, and might not have been possible, or as affordable, in a more developed mobile market.

<sup>20</sup> Tanzania Mid-term report, 4, Anything else to share

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 3.1 'Who is using the BFM, Why and How?'

<sup>22</sup> HPA Endline report, 4.6

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Tanzania endline report

Several factors contributed to this. Incomes among the target population may have been too low for most people to have phones. 21% of survey respondents in Somaliland reported household income of under USD 100 per month,<sup>25</sup> which made funding airtime, electricity to charge the handset, and the device itself difficult. Difficulty with travel during rainy seasons might also contribute to this seasonally, according to reports from Tanzania.<sup>26</sup> Introducing the toll-free number in Somaliland did increase feedback markedly, overtaking the suggestion box as the most popular channel.<sup>27</sup> This is somewhat at odds with the strong finding that access to phones was a burden, although the reason may be that indirect beneficiaries found this less challenging.

Literacy was a clear challenge to uptake. Responding to the finding that 45% of survey respondents indicated that they cannot read at all, HPA also developed video and radio-based awareness-raising and explanatory materials, although it is not clear how much the latter were used.<sup>28</sup> They experimented with pictorial forms (tick-boxes with happy and sad faces) for suggestion boxes, which reportedly increased the impression of confidentiality as people no longer relied on other people to write it out.<sup>29</sup>

HPA, who have their own radio studio in the office, had some success providing pictorial awareness-raising materials, and used a radio show to share successful case studies and explain the purpose of the BFM. Community members would call in to request information about specific topics, such as family planning, which are then included in the show subsequently. Audio groups listen to the show and give feedback via voice call. This should be part and parcel of the use of BFM in low-literacy areas, but can be particularly helpful, for example in structuring SMS feedback.

***Assumption: That those without phones would borrow them, and illiterate people would use intermediaries to write text messages and suggestion box feedback***

Although there is clear evidence that beneficiaries would solicit help to write feedback messages for the suggestion boxes, but it is not clear how often feedback was received via mobile on behalf of someone else. This may be because non-literate beneficiaries were loath to approach relatively well-off and literate phone owners for help, perhaps because those people (mainly men) might not have agreed or approved, or out of privacy concerns.

***Assumption: the system would be fast and responsive***

As compared to the delays between feedback being shared via suggestion boxes and the CFO being able to collect them, phone-based feedback arrived in near real-time. Staff were swiftly made aware of problems that needed immediate attention, such as clinics being closed during normal operational hours. Beneficiaries reported liking getting an immediate response.

The CUAMM CFO reported that she found it easier to close the feedback loop through the mobile BFM, as she can respond directly to the same phone. However, it was noted that this meant that the changes made would still have to be shared with others through broadcast means, e.g., through noticeboards.

***Assumption: All BFM in this approach would be confidential, and could be anonymous or attributed at the beneficiary's discretion***

It seems from comparison of the mid-term review and endline that making the suggestion boxes easier to use for illiterate people meant that it was viewed as being more confidential - while SMS remained a written format which many people had to ask others for help with. However, the pictorial feedback forms did reduce the depth of feedback available to the partner.

Predominantly male ownership of technology had a significant chilling effect on the use of the mobile BFM by women. Participants in FGDs in Tanzania reported that borrowing a phone from a husband (or a friend) would lead to unwelcome intrusion and oversight: 'they will ask who are you talking to? Then they tell you speak while they listen to everything you are saying.' In a context where women are subject to men's authority (which was the case in both settings), and as women and girl children are almost always at a disadvantage in terms of the time and disposable income to buy and maintain a cell phone, it was inevitable that men would form a high proportion of users of these channels.

However, male respondents during end-line FGDs reported that the feeling of confidentiality offered by the voice line made it popular, although tellingly it was still used far less than the suggestion boxes and far less than the men appear to believe.<sup>30</sup>

***Assumption: Feedback would be unstructured, and both solicited and unsolicited.***

This held true, although the addition by HPA of the pictorial feedback forms for their project had the potential to structure feedback. This is dealt with in more detail below.

<sup>25</sup> High level learning from HPA MTR and End-line

<sup>26</sup> Monthly report from CUAMM Tanzania, June 2015

<sup>27</sup> HPA Endline report

<sup>28</sup> HPA were trialling awareness-raising messaging delivered during radio shows at the time of the MTR, although it is not clear that there was a tangible outcome. They have an operational radio studio and the potential for the use of radio was discussed in the context assessment report. (BFM Country-level Design HPA Somaliland, 4.6)

<sup>29</sup> High-level learning from MTR and Endline

<sup>30</sup> High-level learning from MTR and Endline

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**Assumption: The approach would be the low-cost option, through time savings gained by reducing the data processing load.**

The original plan had been to sensitise beneficiaries not to expect a response via SMS or phone unless they requested one, or to restrict responses to a few short sessions per day.<sup>31</sup> In practice, CFOs were diligent about calling and texting people back to respond to or clarify their feedback, even calling back SMS senders, as they assumed that low literacy would make a text-based interaction difficult.

At HPA, the CFO received large volumes of calls, particularly once the toll-free line was in place, meaning a high workload in returning calls and entering data into the feedback database. 10-20 phone calls were received per day, and notes taken by hand, and then transcribed into the tracking system. This was particularly so as the toll-free number did not link to any computer system to track the calls, as the FrontlineSync, full-price line did.<sup>32</sup> Text messages would be replied to in sessions several times a week, although those coming into FrontlineCloud also received an automated reply confirming receipt.

The CUAMM endline, on the other hand, noted that relatively low levels of feedback via voice and SMS (the highest being 14 pieces of feedback, in July 2015) meant that the set-up costs, training and even the monthly cost of the airtime vouchers may not be good value for money.

By designing for easier use by beneficiaries, the HPA pilot actually improved the effectiveness (certainly the throughput) of the BFM, while hugely reducing sustainability - because managing and responding to the feedback is effectively a full-time role, the mechanism is harder to sustain and fundraise for as part and parcel of the normal operation of such a programme. Arguably, the operation was also less efficient because of the burden of maintaining the BFM. At present, the CFO has been moved to other duties at the conclusion of the project, solely due to funding considerations as beneficiaries, partners and the HPA team were clear that the BFM had been a success and should continue.

The airtime costs for the line were relatively low, although it's important to note that a similar solution in a more developed mobile market might not have been so cost-effective.

The project demonstrated that while it is possible to design mobile interventions that represent high value for money, there is nothing inherent about mobile that means that it can achieve better data at lower cost than analogue or in-person mechanisms. Indeed, in most countries, the toll-free line that HPA set up would have cost far more than was available in the budget - it was only because Somaliland's operator is small and approachable that this option was open to HPA at all.

## OTHER ISSUES

### Data management

Both projects appear to have coped reasonably well with managing data within FrontlineCloud and outside of it, mostly in Excel spreadsheets. There is no information on how far partners ensured that Personally Identifiable Information (PII) was protected during storage and transfer; how far the passwords to the email account and FrontlineCloud account were shared with others, whether activity logs were maintained, or any review of these issues undertaken. There is no record of any planned risk-mitigation steps in case PII was found to have become vulnerable.

There is no evidence that partners extended the use of SMS and missed calls beyond the BFM, for example by gathering monitoring data from field staff and partners using text messaging. From the reports of the CFO, it seems that the SMS and missed call data were manually transcribed into a new spreadsheet, thus setting up parallel data streams.

Across the broader project, the lack of data for decision-making and meta analysis of trends and emerging issues within the BFM has been noted. The Approach One segment of the project initially included a 'dashboard' element which would raise feedback up to the level of the donor, by making it visible on a website. This idea was shelved early on, as it was not clear how feedback could be coded so as to report common themes across the loosely-related projects; how the language barriers were to be overcome; and whether non-mobile feedback from Approach One projects (let alone data from Approach Two and Three projects) would be included.

However, it would have been a relatively simple technical step to have set up a simple dashboard fed by incoming text messages and calls, and requiring the CFO to select a code from perhaps 5-10 options covering most of the common types of feedback. Data entry from non-FrontlineCloud sources could easily have been via webform, which could feed into the dashboard in the same way. This step was simply not envisaged by the SIMLab and World Vision project team, but could have made a difference to the way that the partners understood the BFM and made strategic programmatic decisions.

Building data coding and analysis into the design of the project from the beginning is critical if the BFM is to rise above the individual feedback loop to inform strategic decision-making at the project, organisational and donor levels. This is covered in depth in other learning materials produced by the team, but it is worth noting the role that technology can play in structuring data and then feeding it through APIs and uploads into other dashboards. This is perhaps the next task to be tackled, and indeed many actors are beginning to re-examine how to make this kind of community-generated data decision-friendly.

### Other mobile communications with communities

Although many of the HPA staff acknowledged that they used text messaging and Over The Top (OTT) messaging apps like WhatsApp to communicate with others, there were conflicting reports as to whether beneficiaries or their families would ever contact staff in this way

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<sup>31</sup> Approach design document

<sup>32</sup> HPA MTR 2015



on their personal phones. This is unusual in SIMLab's experience, and indeed this is borne out by stories from elsewhere in the pilot: for example in another project, the 'M&E Manager also use[s] a social media platform (WhatsApp) with one of the Ward Health Committee (WHC) members to relay the feedback to rest of the WHC members and ensure it reaches the communities.'

This type of tech-enabled communication between service users and staff arises organically and is typically a strong sign of a potential new official channel to throw open. Perhaps the lack of such communication in these two settings is an indicator of the paucity of access to technology for the target beneficiary group in the two mobile technology feedback approach locations.

### **The opportunity for structured feedback - low-cost, better data by design**

It is important to distinguish between three qualities which at times have been conflated in the mobile technology feedback approach pilots. This approach had two unique variables, compared to the others. First, that they were mobile-enabled. Second, that they were unsolicited, which in the absence of any steps to set out structure, meant that the data was unstructured. The pilots did uncover an opportunity to maintain the throughput of the voice line, and increase the popularity of the SMS line, by structuring data as part of the design.

For voice calls, an Interactive Voice Response mechanism, like the one used by the Red Cross in the Haiti Earthquake response,<sup>33</sup> could be used to allow callers to select from a range of options, to denote the type of feedback they were giving. For example, pressing 1 might select 'clinic closed during opening hours'. There could also be the option to leave a message or request a call back, maintaining the conversational aspect that beneficiaries enjoyed. However, this would require the IVR system to be set up, which might require further conversations with the mobile operator and a third-party software provider like Freedom Fone or EngageSpark. The Haitian Red Cross project has allowed for the tracking of which information beneficiaries have accessed most frequently, spurring the implementers to update and upload content in those topic areas of highest interest.<sup>34</sup>

A simpler starting point would be to add a voicemail box to the existing HPA toll-free line, which was suggested by participants at the validation event.

For SMS, the addition could be simpler. In Pakistan, Strengthening Participatory Organisations developed pictorial keys to numbered feedback which the community could text in. Critically, the cartoons attached to each number (for example, reporting corruption with a picture of a staff member asking for a bribe) were designed with the community, and the community themselves suggested SMS for the pilot. This despite low literacy in the area - people felt that SMS was low-cost enough to manage, as long as there was a simple system for them to follow. In this way, feedback would arrive pre-coded, and could then be followed up on in the normal way. Freeform responses could receive a reply asking for a response according to the code.

The type of sensitisation this would require need not necessarily mean that responses become solicited - simply that the awareness-raising materials would need to include this information.

It would also be advisable to stick to decisions not to call respondents back, as this contributed significantly to the unsustainable design of the BFM from a staffing perspective.

Data must always be coded somewhere to be able to be manipulated, whether by the respondent as they send it in, or by the CFO on receipt. Where CFO time is limited, it may be better to ask more of respondents, provided there are alternatives for those who cannot manage the coding system.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the beginning the project team acknowledged that utilising mobile would not be a strong strategy in projects targeting vulnerable and low-income women. However, the mobile technology feedback approach project settings were both selected following context assessments that suggested that they would be appropriate communities in which to trial mobile-enabled BFM. Both staff and community members felt that mobile would be appropriate, although there was some trepidation about literacy. Even at the end of the project, HPA validation event participants (specifically, MCH staff) said that people 'send SMS and phone calls all the time' and that they expected the use of mobile BFM to grow over the following five years.

In reality, but take-up was much lower; mobile phone ownership much less common, and female access to phones much more constrained than had been suspected. Some of this mismatch between expectation and outcome may be the known tendency for context assessment and planning process participants to respond more positively to questions than they could, so as not to discourage the intervention from coming to their community. It may also be due to the difference between staff and community technology usage and familiarity, and a lack of staff understanding of the true politics of technology use by women in these communities. It did mean that the mobile-enabled BFM was markedly less accessible for women than hoped, and had less take-up across the board.

Nonetheless, the partners responded relatively well to the challenges posed by pre-set feedback channels that could not be substantively influenced by the findings of the context assessment. Because the design of the project was inherently multi-channel, and beneficiaries found ways to get around the literacy requirements of suggestion boxes by asking others to write their feedback for them, it does not seem that

<sup>33</sup> Humanitarian Innovation Fund. Case Study, Mobile technology: listening to the voice of Haitians

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 35

groups of people were unable to provide feedback because of the use of mobile in the project, although the content and nature of the feedback may have been affected. This would have been a larger problem had there not been an alternative to mobile, however, which should be noted by others seeking to develop similar mechanisms. The learning, documented elsewhere, that multichannel approaches are critical not only to reach different people, but for the same people to turn to for different purposes, is salutary.

It's also good to note that mobile should not be disregarded in a low-resource and low-literacy context. Previous case studies have been able to build the capacity of the community with pictorial guides linked to number codes (Strengthening Participatory Organisations, Pakistan) and trained citizen reporters provided with phones (Christian Aid, Kenya)<sup>35</sup>, although this last project reported similar challenges with low female response rates.

It is clear, though, that the constraints of the project's design, which limited the team to designated feedback channels despite clear evidence that they were inappropriate, hampered the BFM and devoted considerable resources to SMS-based mechanisms which were not good value for money, and a time-consuming de-facto telephone hotline which has seriously affected the sustainability of the pilot for the partners. Had the team been able to design and implement BFM that included radio and automated IVR systems in addition to the analogue channels the pilot included, the BFM might have been less distorted by gender and more heavily used, and have become part and parcel of the work not only of the partners, but of the government services they support.

Our next steps should focus on testing and developing learning, tools and guidance around the assessment of appropriate technology and design of sustainable, appropriate technology-enabled Beneficiary Feedback Mechanisms.

## About SIMLab

*Social Impact Lab (SIMLab) helps to build accessible, responsive, and resilient systems using inclusive technologies, helping people and organisations solve both the technological and human obstacles along the way. We define inclusive technologies broadly: those that have broad reach, relatively low costs, rely on existing infrastructure, and use common data formats. Examples of inclusive technologies include SMS, radio, voice telephony, even blackboards and megaphones. They can be knit together to extend, to the last mile, usable systems that build impact through participation.*

*We believe that equitable participation of marginalised and 'last-mile' populations in public, economic, and social life contributes to a more just world. We believe that increasing systemic adoption and use of inclusive technologies leads to greater access to services for all populations, accountability and responsiveness of institutions, and resilience of societies. We're a small team, based in Washington, DC in the USA.*

Between 2014 and 2016, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) supported 7 NGOs to pilot Beneficiary Feedback Mechanisms (BFMs) as part of their maternal and child health projects<sup>1</sup>.

WorldVision UK led a consortium to support their journey and learn:

- What makes a beneficiary feedback system effective?
- Does it improve accountability to communities and the delivery of projects?
- Is it worth the investment?

To help answer these questions, three approaches to collecting feedback were tested:

1. Mobile phone technology for feedback through SMS and voice calls
2. Structured questions to seek feedback from the community about specific aspects of the project at regular intervals
3. Community designed feedback systems where communities decided what issues they would like to provide feedback about and how they would like to provide feedback

To enable comparison across contexts, each pilot focused on collecting and responding to feedback through one of these approaches. All pilots included suggestion boxes for collecting confidential feedback, a dedicated staff member (Community Feedback Officer) and the introduction of notice boards for information provision.

<sup>35</sup> PPA: Resilience & Advocacy. SMS Voices: contextualizing advocacy in Kenya. June 2015

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The Beneficiary Feedback Mechanisms Pilot closed in April 2016. This Case Study is one of a suite of eight compiled by World Vision UK and its partners. In addition, learning from the pilot has been captured through learning documents, a short video documentary and practical guidance. These resources will be made available for other organisations to use. For more information or feedback, please contact the Evidence & Accountability Team at World Vision UK. World Vision is also committed to enhancing its own accountability, including actively integrating beneficiary feedback into its own development and humanitarian programmes across the world.

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