



An Oxfam enumerator interviews a cash for work programme participant in Barack, Ethiopia, as part of a project evaluation. Photo: Amy O'Donnell/Oxfam

BUILDING ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRUST

How digital registration and distribution systems are improving efficiency and accountability in Ethiopia

Oxfam is using a digital registration and distribution management tool in its work to assist drought-affected communities in the eastern Somali region of Ethiopia. This has increased efficiencies across the system. It has also helped to ensure that people are paid quickly and fairly for their participation in a cash for work scheme. This case study gives an overview of the tool and the benefits it has brought to the programme.

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2016 Ethiopia was badly affected by a devastating drought triggered by the El Niño weather system. Getting aid to communities who were living without access to food and water was time-critical. Oxfam introduced a digital system that is making the registration of beneficiaries and distribution of aid more accurate and efficient.

Livelihoods Officer Abdirashid Muhumed Kalonbi has been involved in implementing an emergency project in Fafan in Ethiopia's eastern Somali region. He has first-hand experience of the limitations of the old paper-based system, and said: 'The most difficult task is the registration of beneficiaries, which takes most of the time.' Paper processes involved tracking individuals' data and unreliable verification of identities. Staff previously had to manually search through lists of households to find those who met the selected vulnerability criteria. In the absence of data-handling procedures, the access rights of different staff to the data was not clear, and records were not always accurate or kept up to date.

2 A NEW WAY OF WORKING

In June 2016, as part of the Scaling Humanitarian ICTs Network (SHINE) programme, the project in Fafan began to introduce a digital registration and distribution management tool called Last Mile Mobile Solutions (LMMS). This digitalizes the traditional paper-based process of registering project participants and managing aid distributions. Basic beneficiary information is captured digitally; this generates a unique ID card for each beneficiary and builds a database to help the programme team manage cash distributions and track activities.

'At the beginning of the training it seemed unrealistic that this would work – we thought LMMS would not fit our context,' admits Abdirashid. 'But we soon realized that LMMS is very flexible: it can accommodate projects with different objectives and different modalities. Also, the system does not always require internet connection – this is crucial, especially in remote areas.'

During cash distributions, each household presents an ID card with its unique barcode and photograph. In contexts where the use of images would not be appropriate (e.g. if there is a security risk, or if the head of household is not available or does not consent to having their picture taken), ID cards are issued with only names printed on the front. The cards enable staff to verify people's identities much more accurately than before, as they can carry out visual verification and/or ask a series of questions based on the individual's full profile, which appears on their screen when an ID card barcode is scanned. Oxfam is currently the only

agency digitalizing the process in this area, although other agencies have expressed interest in adopting the system in their work.

Keeping better track of cash for work activities

Some individuals automatically qualify for unconditional cash, especially if they match certain vulnerability criteria. However, for the majority, the project introduced a cash for work scheme, whereby receiving cash is conditional on completing a certain number of hours carrying out activities. These include soil and water conservation, building classrooms, and taking part in communal agricultural activities such as growing onions. The cash for work scheme has dual benefits: the injection of cash can help with immediate food security and stimulate the economy, while activities such as planting crops and improving infrastructure contribute to communities' longer-term resilience.

However, the cash for work scheme was difficult to administer using the paper-based system. As Abdirashid explains: 'There was no interconnection of household rations and the amount of work undertaken by each household to earn these rations.' Oxfam worked with the Somalia Microfinance Institution (SMI) to address this problem, aided by the digitalized system which records the number of hours worked and calculates how much to pay each household. On completion of work, as recorded in the system, SMI distributes cash in village centres – ensuring both fairness in the distribution and convenience for collection.

3 BENEFITS OF THE DIGITAL SYSTEM

LMMS is designed to capture key household information to enable improved accountability and due diligence as well as efficient project implementation. Previously, finding individual records involved manually searching through paperwork or carrying out time-consuming data-input processes. With the new system, once beneficiaries have been registered, it takes minimum time and effort to search data and to edit and update information. Opportunities for data manipulation are minimized, and it is straightforward to generate reports for donors.

In addition to the obvious benefits for Oxfam, the new system has had a positive impact on the individuals it supports. Affected communities value being given the ID cards, as was made clear during a focus group discussion. According to participants, having the cards gives them a sense of security, as people were previously unsure about the payment they would receive. One man said, 'The card is a confirmation that we will get our payments.' The photograph is also an advantage because if a card is lost, its owner can be easily identified and it can be returned. Some people reported that they had been able to use their card as a useful form of photo ID in other situations.

The dignity of choice

The system provides people with a secure means of receiving cash, and gives them the dignity of choice – ensuring they can buy what they need, when they need it. As one woman said: 'We bought food and oil from markets in Shinile and Dire Dawe. We also bought children's books, pens and soap. The benefit of cash is that we can buy what we need.'

4 APPLYING THE LEARNING

During the ongoing 2017 drought response in Ethiopia, Oxfam has taken the learning from this pilot and incorporated it into its Cash Based Intervention in the Somali region, drawing upon the benefit of ICTs speeding up and simplifying delivering humanitarian aid. As a result, ICT based beneficiary registrations and distributions have been adopted and implemented as part of Oxfam's large-scale response. As of the end of May 2017, all drought response zones in the Somali region were using LMMS. In order to make this happen, Oxfam provided various training sessions to key local implementing partners and their staff on the use of LMMS, and deployed an additional six LMMS servers to ensure effectiveness of this approach.

The SHINE programme

The Scaling Humanitarian ICTs Network (SHINE) programme is a three-year multi-country innovation programme dedicated to exploring how information communications technologies (ICTs) can add value to activities across the humanitarian project cycle through improving the quality and efficiency of humanitarian aid. Launched in Ethiopia in 2014, the programme scaled to support activities in Mali, DRC, Iraq and Indonesia before coming to an end in March 2017.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email leldon@oxfam.org.uk

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