



An Oxfam member of staff conducting an interview using a mobile phone in Konseguela, southern Mali. Photo: Almoctar Yattara/Oxfam

INCREASING QUALITY AND EFFICIENCY IN AID DISTRIBUTION

How new technologies are supporting Oxfam activities in northern Mali

Communities in the Gao region of northern Mali are struggling to cope with the combined effects of drought and conflict. Oxfam is distributing food, seeds and cash – using digital solutions to increase efficiency, improve security and ensure help reaches the most vulnerable people. This case study presents some of the information communications technologies introduced and discusses the benefits of them.

1 INTRODUCTION

Poor rains and ongoing conflict have taken a heavy toll on communities in the Gao region of northern Mali. In the village of Goutine, which relies on agriculture for food and income, erratic rains have badly affected crops. Local insecurity and the absence of government structures mean people have received limited support to help them understand the changing weather patterns and the need to adapt their planting and harvesting practices. The region's trade networks have also been disrupted by ongoing conflict; pastoralists from Nigeria and Niger no longer travel to weekly markets, reducing the value of the livestock that are traditionally traded there.

In this challenging context, Oxfam has been providing support to the people of Goutine through the distribution of food, seeds and cash. Since 2014, it has been introducing digital tools to improve quality and efficiency at every stage of its response, from initial data capture to monitoring and reporting.

2 A NEW WAY OF WORKING

In the past, the planning, implementation and monitoring of humanitarian activities in such contexts have been hindered by problems relating to the poor quality of data captured. The registration process to enrol community members in activities in Mali was previously complex and time-consuming, as was paper-based assessment and monitoring. The system used thumbprints to identify participants, which made verification difficult and unreliable. There were limited checks to ensure that data were captured consistently and clearly, increasing the risk of fraud.

Saving time and costs, from data collection to delivery

In August 2014 Oxfam in Mali began introducing several new information communications technologies (ICTs) to address risks and inefficiencies such as those described above. Building on this experience, the team subsequently joined the Scaling Humanitarian ICTs Network (SHINE) programme the following year. Their use of ICTs included using the Last Mile Mobile Solutions (LMMS) system to register beneficiaries and manage distributions of both cash and food for projects funded by ECHO; Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada (DFATD); and the World Food Programme.

Oxfam also introduced SurveyCTO – a survey platform for electronic data collection, based on Open Data Kit (ODK) – to enable staff to conduct mobile baseline surveys and post-distribution monitoring. This

platform was selected by the country team partly because of their previous experience with ODK. By using these tools to collect higher quality data on beneficiaries, Oxfam aimed to improve the quality, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of its interventions.

3 BENEFITS OF THE NEW APPROACH

The use of mobile surveys to support assessments and monitoring activities has helped increase the speed with which data is collected, allowing teams to review and make decisions much faster than in previous activities.

Digitizing beneficiary registration has enabled Oxfam to speed up distributions and ensure that aid is reaching the most vulnerable people. Improved beneficiary identification processes have made it much simpler to verify records and household entitlements, and to track and report on activities. The system also helps to prevent fraud, thanks to reliable verification and clear digital audit trails.

A positive reception from communities

For people in Goutine, the use of mobile technology in this context was a new concept. As a female community member explained, 'We do not have much experience with ICTs. We only use phones. But the phone makes life easier, we receive information from everywhere, we get to communicate with our relatives.' This widespread use of mobile phones perhaps contributed to beneficiaries' acceptance of the new approach.

Perceptions have been positive, and in the majority of communities, people quickly understood the use of mobile devices to capture information and conduct activities. Indeed, many welcomed it – the new tools not only save time for Oxfam, but also for the beneficiaries themselves. As one woman put it, 'The use of ICT facilitated the work. It was very fast, and we were able to quickly return to our household tasks.'

Flexibility is key to success

Understanding the local context was key to successfully engaging with the new system. Oxfam paid close attention to the local security situation, and while the use of ICTs was preferred by many teams due to the ease and speed of data capture it enabled, in some locations it was deemed too insecure, or culturally inappropriate, to introduce mobile devices. In these instances, activities reverted to paper. In a context where the situation can change rapidly, this sensitivity and flexibility to adapt the approach to local needs is crucial.

The positive experience in Goutine has influenced Oxfam's work in Mali, and ICTs are now being integrated in appropriate projects across the country.

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.

The SHINE programme is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

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This case study was written by Sekou Doumbia and Oumou B Kane. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Laura Eldon and Jane Garton in its production. It is part of a series of papers and reports written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

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

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-0-85598-990-3 in June 2017.

DOI: 10.21201/2017.9903

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