

Complex Emergencies 2.0: Dumb Phones, Smart People and the Art of Humanitarian Communications

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Abstract

An arc of instability from Afghanistan through the Middle East to West Africa is leading to unprecedented displacement and forced migration with a staggering 87.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. This global crisis of epic dimensions is straining the humanitarian system to a breaking point. Despite the huge need, OCHA's recent appeal for 20.1 billion USD is 80% underfunded and that is unlikely to change.

One common thread that connects the communities affected by the many intractable, complex emergencies that beset the world today is mobile technology, whether 'dumb' feature phones or new generation smartphones. They are tapping into the social networks that enable them to stay connected to one another in every phase of the crisis. An increasingly urgent question is whether technology can do more than is currently being asked of it by enabling people to be better informed and empowered to respond to needs locally in complex emergencies rather than waiting for international aid that realistically may never come.

The rapid and increasing exposure of crisis-affected populations to communications tools has profound implications for humanitarian contexts:

- It puts the power of the internet at the fingertips of people on the move, allowing them to problem solve even in complex emergencies with news, maps, money transfer and other tools.
- Crisis-affected people now have access to networks – from diaspora to smugglers – that were previously unavailable to them.
- It brings greater scrutiny to the work of humanitarian actors, accountability by the back door in effect.

This paper explores how the humanitarian community can harness these new realities brought about by the rapid spread of mobile technology to better protect and support the most vulnerable while empowering them to find the most appropriate solutions, thereby easing some of the strain on the humanitarian system.

Introduction

As 2015 drew to a close, it brought the news that more than one million people had been counted crossing into Europe during the previous 12 months. Most of these were Syrians fleeing war, Afghans fleeing instability and Iraqis fleeing the Islamic State. These people fleeing complex emergencies accounted for the majority crossing the relatively short distance from Turkey to Greece and as was widely noted, this movement of people was greatly facilitated by the use of smartphones along with the ubiquitous GPS map. In the central Mediterranean, those crossing the more dangerous passing from Libya to Lampedusa were primarily coming from North and West Africa. These migrants and refugees, in contrast to those originating from the Middle East and Afghanistan, had less exposure to mobile technology but nonetheless were able to remain networked with their peers, and indeed often their smugglers, through simple tools such as SMS, Whatsapp and Skype.

The unprecedented numbers of migrants and refugees pouring into Europe have brought Europe's asylum system to breaking point, creating volatility in European politics and bringing extremist and far right voices to the fore. These challenges show no sign of easing. The first three weeks of January 2016 saw an increasing number of arrivals to Europe: at over 36,500 people, this is ten times more than in the same period last year (IOM 2016a). The strain is so great

that some European leaders are discussing action effectively abrogating from the 1951 Geneva Conventions. However, the reality is that blocking people seeking to cross European frontiers will not change the displacement brought about by the humanitarian crises they are facing. It is expected that the arc of instability from Afghanistan to West Africa will generate even greater numbers of displaced people in the days ahead and along with it an increasing need for humanitarian aid.

Although the humanitarian system is cracking under the strain of multiple complex emergencies being tackled simultaneously, the silver lining on the cloud is the rapid growth of easy to use, mobile technology. Displaced people are learning as they go that the best aid is often the aid you bring yourself and that a simple smartphone may be the most effective tool to help them transition from crisis to safety. People in crisis are resourceful in using technology to navigate their way to safety whether using phones for SMS and voice or up-to-the-minute smart technology.

Evolving Communications Landscape

According to the International Telecommunications Union, by the end of 2015, there were more than 7 billion mobile cellular subscriptions, corresponding to a penetration rate of 97%, up from 738 million in 2000. Moreover, the proportion of the population

covered by a 2G mobile-cellular network grew from 58% in 2001 to 95% in 2015, primarily in developing countries (ITU 2015).

It is important to recognize that for many in developing countries, their only exposure to the internet is via a mobile smartphone device and that experience is often limited to Facebook. In some countries, more than 60% of the population agree with the statement that "Facebook is the Internet" (GSMA Intelligence 2015). Now thanks to the Facebook Zero app, the internet has been put into the hands of some of the most vulnerable people on the planet who only have a feature phone. It is currently available to hundreds of millions of people via 50 mobile operators across dozens of developing countries - for free.

Recent research suggests that the developing world is more 'mobile' than the developed world with an increasing number of mobile innovations and local apps being produced in the developing world, for the developing world as their approach to technology has followed a unique, "mobile first" development trajectory. As access to mobile technology increases in many new markets, there is a wealth of local solutions to local challenges such as multi-SIM card phones, low-value recharges, and mobile payments. These local innovations are responding to challenges such as low literacy, limited bandwidth and affordability by providing context-appropriate solutions (World Bank 2012).

Not only does mobile technology allow people to stay connected, but research indicates it is also good for the economy. A study conducted in 2006 found that a 10 percent increase in mobile penetration in developing countries was correlated to a 0.8 percent increase in economic growth (Qiang and Rossotto 2009).

Notably it is the developing world—driven by the increased affordability of devices—that will lead most of the growth in global smartphone adoption, reaching 63% by the end of the decade with an expected increase of 2.9 billion smartphone connections by 2020 (GSMA 2015).

Contemporary Complex Emergencies

As their name would indicate, complex emergencies are, well, complex. This is particularly true from a communications perspective given that information - what is shared and how it is presented - often becomes a weapon of warfare. It can be politicized, distorted, or tightly controlled by governments or ruling parties. Journalists and reporters may become persona non grata in such contexts and prohibited or prevented from doing their job, often facing threats, abuse or even death (Reuters 2016).

The socio-political climate of complex emergencies also has a detrimental impact on trust and confidence. As news outlets previously

considered reliable are taken over as political mouthpieces, civil society becomes increasingly uncertain and doubtful as to the validity of what they hear. In this context and the inevitable chaos of complex emergencies, rumours thrive and gossip takes on a life of its own. Building credibility and trust takes time, especially among populations who have had their trust violated in the past. This is something that is often overlooked by humanitarian agencies in complex emergencies and should be considered further.

While this double-edged sword of communications is true of traditional media, it is now expounded by information technology and social media which render time and space virtually irrelevant. Geographic boundaries and limited coverage area no longer pose the same restrictions they once did as now information can be shared to a much wider audience in mere seconds via new media platforms. Communication networks become increasingly transnational as social media, particularly Facebook, connects a widely dispersed diaspora, for example Syrians or Iraqis spread across many countries throughout the Middle East and other parts of the world.

Reaching the Hard-to-Reach

Physical access to communities affected by complex emergencies poses a challenge in many contexts. The small mountainous town of Madaya, Syria is a well-known recent example of

a population living under siege with no access to humanitarian assistance (Melvin et al 2016). Unless solutions are found to enable greater enforcement of international humanitarian law, it is expected that field operations and access to the most vulnerable populations in complex emergencies will become increasingly difficult and untenable.

Such predictions underscore the critically important role of communications as a form of aid. Even without physical access, key life-saving information can be provided remotely to crisis-affected communities. Moreover humanitarian agencies can engage in two-way communications to better understand the situation and needs of those communities. Given the increasing risks and high costs involved with complex emergencies, remote management seems to be relied on with increasing frequency. This opens the door to new engagement through technology but also to greater misunderstanding, meaning agencies will need to redouble their efforts to ensure communities receive culturally-appropriate, contextualized messages that do not compromise the security of the local population.

Ultimately this may be the role that the humanitarian sector needs to master as the reality becomes increasingly clear that resources for humanitarian assistance are finite and it will not be possible to provide all the shelters, food,

health supplies and other aid urgently needed by 87.6 million people across the globe.

Complex Emergencies: a Moving Target

Over the past year, the international community has begun to wrestle with new challenges in dealing with the current migration crisis in Europe, which may be the new face of complex emergencies. Given predictions on increasing levels of displacement and migration in the years ahead, this seems highly likely. While the Fourth Industrial Revolution may have been the main topic of the 2016 World Economic Forum in Davos, global migration was the topic on the minds of the world's leaders.

Smugglers and traffickers have been quick to take advantage of the significant number of vulnerable and desperate migrants arriving into Europe. The clandestine nature of the migrant journeys means that information about boat and other crossings is shared through private channels, typically via mobile phones and social media networks. While many migrating intuitively know that engaging the services of a smuggler can lead to arrest, deportation or even death, they are also highly motivated by push factors to flee oppression, hardship or intolerance and improve their life circumstances. The challenge in communicating with people on the move is that they are hard to reach, highly motivated and disbelieving of official messaging, since they often originate from countries with

weak, corrupt or abusive regimes. An absence of reliable, trusted information on safe migration choices, or conversely the prevalence of unverified rumours and speculation among crisis-affected populations drives individuals to take risky and often doomed journeys.

If current trends continue, governments and international agencies will need to work together closely to respond to the vast information needs of migrants and refugees arriving by foot, by train, by boat to countries of refuge. In particular, they will need to tap into communication channels most accessed and trusted by migrants to disseminate information about services and alternatives to irregular migration. To ensure maximum impact the information must be customized to be readily understood across multiple linguistic and cultural target groups with varying levels of literacy.

Moreover in an increasingly volatile European political context, where migration has become a dangerously toxic issue, there is heightened need for effective public advocacy and information campaigns that combat xenophobia and highlight the contributions of migrants and refugees. Communications with host communities throughout the Balkans, Hungary, Greece and other European countries will need to become an increasingly central component of humanitarian communications strategies.

Boutros' Story

“Sometimes Europeans see that we have good phones and ask, ‘Why does a refugee have a phone?’ These phones are like our visas. If we lose our phones, we lose our lives.”

Boutros now lives in Berlin. He left Syria three years ago after his village was attacked with the goal to reach Europe. His phone was one of the most precious things he carried with on his journey.

Boutros used his phone not only for communication, but also as a map. When the battery died in Macedonia (FYROM), just before the border with Serbia, he was lost for two days in the mountains without food or water until a shepherd helped him find the way. (IOM 2016b)

Source: www.iamamigrant.org

Mobile People and Mobile Technology

The lens with which the humanitarian sector views crisis is all too often restricted to tangible delivery of aid whereas what can be equally useful is the timely provision of relevant and actionable information. Unfortunately the UN aid system divided into efficient thematic clusters that was set up in 2005 viewed communications in the narrow sense of technical networks. It did not foresee the communications revolution which would eventually put the equivalent of a supercomputer into the hands of a displaced person for a mere 50 dollar price tag with dramatic implications for the humanitarian sector. While the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) is in place to ensure the humanitarian system has the

necessary telecommunications infrastructure to respond effectively, it did not anticipate the need to communicate with mobile populations empowered with mobile technology.

At a minimum, the humanitarian sector should be considering ways to provide easy access to reliable, coordinated and context sensitive information of value to migrants and refugees. But this challenge is far greater than it appears at first sight given the multiplicity of languages and the rapidly changing landscape of aid delivery.

Moreover by its nature the UN system is consensual and requires lengthy coordination which often slows the decision-taking process in what are life or death situations. When it comes to communications, this is a particularly critical

issue and the sector needs to reflect on how it can communicate given that many of the obstacles to communication of only a few years ago have disappeared. It is now possible to reach the target audience at minimal cost through videos on smartphones as opposed to just a few years ago when there were high costs involved to broadcast on tv, radio or other traditional media channels.

What needs to urgently change is the way in which the humanitarian system communicates with people on the move as it has not kept pace with the change in technology, meaning that people in need are seeking and finding information from actors who cannot be relied on to have their interests at heart be it smugglers, traffickers, or others seeking to profit from the misfortune of others.

Looking at Europe's new migration flows, to a large extent the humanitarian system has been slow to exploit creative ways to reach and guide crisis-affected people. With some exceptions, the humanitarian system has been weak in its response thus far whereas the private sector has recognized both the need and technological advantage of moving into this space. For example, the Google Crisis Info Hub was created which provides easy access to vital information about lodging, medical facilities and transportation for those arriving to Europe (Aljazeera 2015). Ordinary citizens are also using technology to respond to the needs of people

fleeing crisis. A German website developed in Berlin, called Refugees Welcome, is described as the Airbnb for refugees and allows people to share their homes with approximately 500 refugees matched in shared flats to date (Erbentraut 2015).

At the same time, Facebook has been inundated with fraudulent actors offering to take people from countries in crisis to Europe for a fee. In this fragmented and rapidly developing space, private sector actors with philanthropic aims like Google, Facebook and others are answering the demand alongside more unscrupulous actors seeking to profit from the mobility of people in crisis. Thus far the humanitarian sector has not figured out how to, or even whether to, communicate with affected people with the efficiency with which it tackles the direct provision of aid. As the tools of communication become increasingly ubiquitous, the absence of effective messaging becomes more noticeable in the humanitarian sector.

Collaboration, not Duplication

Responding to this gap in the humanitarian sector, the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network was established in 2009 as a cross-sector collaboration with now convenes more than 30 organizations including humanitarian, media development and technology organizations. Despite the diverse membership, the network

continues to be underfunded and has unrealized potential in the current communications landscape.

The current communications spectrum is so vast and varied that no single agency can hope to respond adequately to communities' information needs. Indeed one organization is a pin prick in a sea of humanitarian needs. However duplication and redundancy continues to be an issue in humanitarian response. In worst case scenarios, seen in several recent crises, every agency sets up its own radio programme, SMS and hotline system because they can and because there is not a humanitarian cluster to ensure coordination of communications. In effect, this means that in the midst of crisis, with their lives turned upside down, local communities may receive 12 different flyers with 12 hotline numbers, thereby adding to existing chaos and confusion. In this 'worst case' scenario, information on community feedback is then collected separately on 12 different computers with no ability to compile data or assess trends based on the feedback.

Recognizing this incoherency, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) along with CDAC partner agencies has taken the approach of developing a common service platform, Community Response Map, that allows agencies to work together to facilitate communications outreach and feedback. The platform and workflow call for collaborative communications

outreach and a professional approach to content creation which uses embedded feedback mechanisms. This is matched with a sophisticated feedback platform with real-time analytics on the impact of communications which any specific actor can use to track feedback on communications outreach and to allow data to be shared with all actors. This ensures problems, duplication and errors are quickly spotted and remedied.

This approach also responds to the recognition and demand from donors that aid agencies collaborate in emergencies, especially when it comes to technology. A key challenge is mainstreaming technology and communications in the humanitarian sector in such a way as to encourage agencies and responders to collaborate rather than replicate systems. Progress has been made with the common service platform Community Response Map and numerous agencies have now used it to collaborate in communications activities in different settings. Greater donor support of the inherent benefits of using common platforms would see the development of new more sophisticated apps enabling communication via smartphones.

Case Studies

IOM works to deliver coordinated, timely, and context-specific humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations, including internally

displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, and migrants affected by natural disasters, political conflicts and complex emergencies. IOM's humanitarian activities are presently ongoing in more than thirty countries around the world, including in all of today's large-scale complex emergencies. The following section provides various case studies on how IOM in collaboration with partner agencies is using mobile and online technology to empower people - often in remote or inaccessible locations - to problem solve and make informed decisions during complex emergencies.

Burundi

Jointly with the Burundi Red Cross, World Vision and UNOCHA, IOM worked to establish a hotline combined with IOM's online data visualization platform, Community Response Map to deliver accurate and relevant information to Burundian communities affected by political protests and natural disasters as the country is facing a severe rainy season aggravated by the El Nino climate event. Since the beginning of the protests in April 2015, it is estimated that over 235,000 people have fled to neighbouring countries (IOM 2015b) and at least 15,000 IDPs have been profiled in two provinces through IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix.

The hotline system in Burundi serves as a source of information for affected communities regarding humanitarian assistance. It also serves

as a feedback mechanism to encourage the accountability of the aid agencies to the recipients. The hotline, which began operations in October 2015, is accessible throughout the country and has increased in relevance following the escalation of violence in December 2015.

Community Response Map is a part of the initiative for improved two-way communication between beneficiaries and the various aid agencies as well as effective interagency collaboration. The platform allows operators to track and visualize feedback as well as report the specific needs of different Burundian communities to the humanitarian community. It also ensures that queries from the IDPs and affected communities are responded to promptly and effectively.

Improved communications with crisis-affected communities was highlighted as a key priority in the Multi-Agency Rapid Assessment conducted in May 2015. Inaccessibility is a particular hurdle for aid agencies due to nomadic tendencies and to the restricted physical access to certain locations, leaving Burundians without potentially life-saving access to aid and assistance. The issue is exacerbated in Burundi following the destruction of five independent radio and TV stations by government forces in April 2015 just prior to presidential elections, following claims that they were broadcasting inaccurate information (UNOCHA 2015).

Conclusion

A communications revolution is happening all around us. Mobile technology is exploding, particularly in the developing world, with costs being pushed down to all-time lows. Numerous tech companies are rapidly occupying the space and developing technology for new markets, the previously 'unconnected' - including many people caught in complex emergencies.

However the content being shared through these channels is key. Humanitarian agencies are not actively using these channels, so the vacuum is being filled by profiteers and unscrupulous actors including smugglers, terrorists, and others. At the end of the day, the technology is available and improving by the minute but it is the content, the speed and efficiency through which life-saving information is disseminated that is lacking. Often overlooked in the humanitarian space is the need for timely, actionable, credible, and easily understood content of use to a traumatized population. Moreover there are current systemic inefficiencies and insufficient funding to ensure credible and useful systems that allow the humanitarian community works collaboratively rather than competitively in the interest of the affected populations.

Humanitarian communications should be guiding and indicative for crisis-affected populations to increase resiliency and solutions in the midst of complex emergencies, especially

in contexts where current aid is insufficient to meet the vast needs. The more we can enable people to self-guide their way out of trouble, the better we can leverage existing resources and bridge the persistent gaps. Humanitarian aid is just a pin prick but through new mobile technology and the power of collaboration, humanitarian agencies have the potential to empower people to assist themselves. These tools and technology do just that and we should use them to further that aim.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to express appreciation to Kellie Coppola and Anita Wadud for background research as well as to Leonard Doyle for editorial guidance on this paper.

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