

infoasaid/ActionAid Isiolo

A Learning Review of the Pilot Communications Project

March 2012

Table of Contents

List of Acronyms	3
1. Introduction	4
2. Country context and ActionAid programmes.....	5
3. infoasaid's project proposal	9
4. Purpose of the learning review	11
4.1 Objective.....	11
4.2 Methodology	12
4.3 Research limitations.....	12
5. Learning review findings.....	13
5.1 What did the infoasaid/ActionAid communications project set out to achieve and what actually occurred? What worked? What didn't work?	13
5.1.1 The distribution and use of mobile phones and solar chargers.....	13
5.1.2 FrontlineSMS	15
5.1.3 FrontlineForms.....	16
5.1.4 Freedom Fone	17
5.1.5 The dissemination of market price information	18
5.2 How, if at all, did the communications project influence the overall humanitarian response?.....	21
5.2.1 Relevance/Appropriateness	21
5.2.2 Coverage	26
5.2.3 Effectiveness	27
5.2.4 Efficiency	31
5.2.5 Impact.....	31
6. Conclusion	33
6.1 Achievements	33
6.2 Challenges.....	34
6.3 Questions which require further investigation.....	35
7. Recommendations for ActionAid Kenya	35

List of Acronyms

AAIK	ActionAid International Kenya
DSG	District Steering Group
FFA	Food for Assets
FDP	Food Distribution Point
FO	Field Officer
GFD	General Food Distribution
PRRO	Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation
RC	Relief Committee
SFP	Supplementary Feeding Programme
WFP	World Food Programme

1. Introduction

During the drought and famine that struck parts of the Horn of Africa in the first months of 2011, infoasaid and ActionAid launched an innovative communications project to support ActionAid's emergency programmes in Isiolo, Kenya by improving communication with drought affected populations.

To overcome the numerous challenges in rapidly communicating with large numbers of people in a vast area with poor roads and security incidents, the project used several communication platforms to send and receive information. These platforms included two mobile phone technology solutions- FrontlineSMS and Freedom Fone- and community bulletins.

The project had three strategic objectives:

- To improve the effectiveness of ActionAid's humanitarian assistance in Isiolo County through systematic, fast, and reliable communication between the organization and the people it serves;
- To enhance ActionAid's monitoring and reporting through improved data collection;
- To provide communities in Isiolo country with vital information that could improve their livelihoods.

Underlying the project's design was ActionAid and infoasaid's shared belief that communication is an aid-deliverable in its own right. The link between information and accountability to crisis-affected communities is at the heart of ActionAid's human rights-based approach. If information is not shared with communities how can an organization guarantee transparency? And if an organization does not listen to communities, engage with them in a dialogue and ensure that their feedback is acted upon, how can that organization claim to be accountable?

By providing communities with vital information, and enabling them to seek information in turn, submit feedback, and interact with humanitarian organizations, communication can help communities become greater participants in their own recovery process. Communicating with crisis-affected communities is not synonymous with accountability but it does promote it.

The infoasaid/ActionAid International Kenya (AAIK) pilot communications project is novel in its approach to delivering communication as a form of humanitarian assistance, and as a means of improving the delivery of food assistance in Kenya. It is also innovative in its use of mobile technology solutions in a protracted crisis (drought) setting.

This learning review aims to identify and document lessons from the infoasaid/AAIK communications project in Isiolo County, from May 2011 to March 2012. The review seeks primarily to contribute to the sector's understanding of whether/how communicating with crisis-affected communities affects the quality of humanitarian assistance. In addition, for humanitarians interested in practical information about establishing similar communications projects, the review looks at the success and challenges of the implementation process and provides recommendations to AAIK for enhancing the current project.

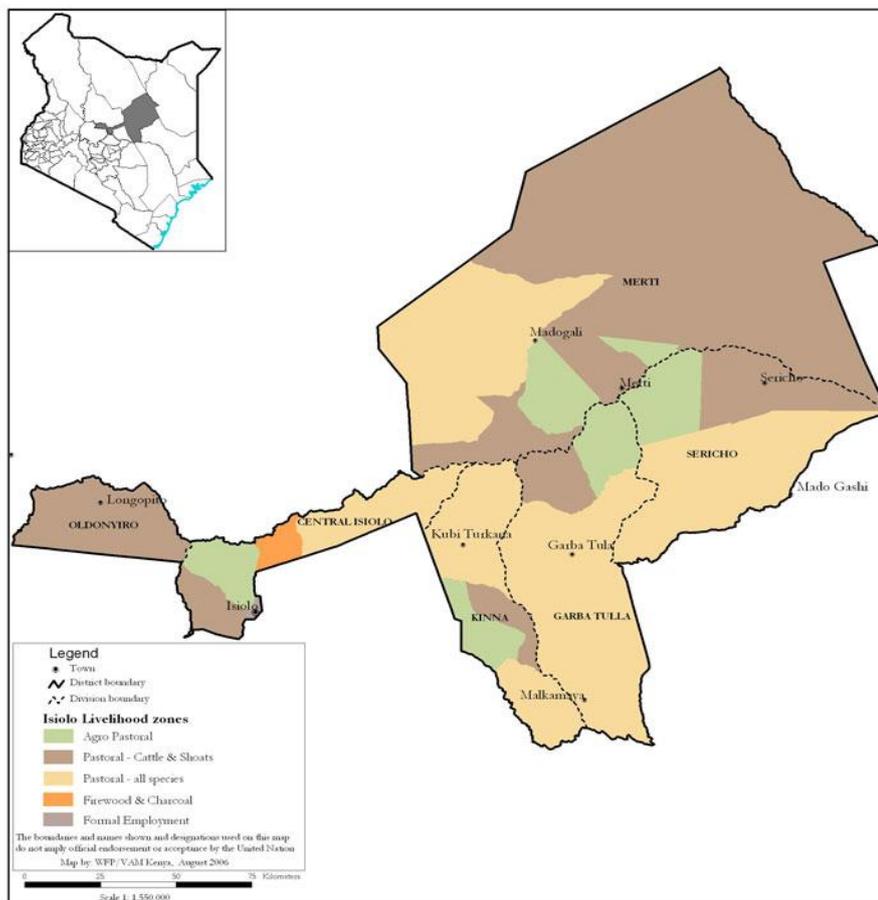
2. Country context and ActionAid programmes

Kenya has a population of approximately 40 million and is a low-income country with a GDP per capita of US\$775 (World Bank, 2010). The 2011 UNDP Human Development Report ranked Kenya among the “low human development” countries of the world, placing it 143rd out of 187 countries.

Isiolo County is a semi-arid area north of Mount Kenya, with a population of about 143,294 (2009 census). The County is divided into 3 Districts, Isiolo, Merti, and Garba Tula. The majority of its inhabitants are semi-nomadic pastoralists from the Borana, Samburu, Turkana and Somali ethnic groups.

Isiolo is set to undergo significant changes according to Vision 2030, Kenya’s national development plan. In addition to the construction of a new airport, on-going oil exploration, and a vast transport programme linking Kenya, Southern Sudan and Ethiopia (the Lamu Port-Southern Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET) project, Isiolo has been identified as one of three new high-end resorts cities to be developed in Kenya among other Vision 2030 flagship projects.

Figure 1: Map of Isiolo District



Source: World Food Programme, Kenya Country Office

Isiolo has been subject to violent clashes and banditry between rival groups since late 2011. A number of security incidents have limited the ability of humanitarian organizations in the region to access all areas. In October 2011, one of ActionAid’s

staff in Isiolo was killed during an armed raid on his village. Following his death, ActionAid temporarily scaled down operations in Isiolo County and its environs.

Food security

Many of the pastoralist communities in Isiolo County have been continuously dependent on food aid from the World Food Programme (WFP) since 2004. The area suffers from chronic drought and food shortages and nearly three quarters of the County's total population lives below the poverty line (International Medical Corps April 2011).

ActionAid has been working on development projects with rural communities in Isiolo County for more than 15 years. The agency has been heavily involved in emergency drought- and famine-relief projects throughout this period. The emergency response programme - Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO), activities include; Food for Assets (FFA), General Food Distribution (GFD) and a Supplementary Feeding Programme (SFP).

ActionAid has been the lead agency in WFP's Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO) programmes in Isiolo since 2004. PRRO assists residents through general food relief and Food for Assets in which residents are provided with food rations in exchange for construction work for on-going projects in water and irrigation schemes. The asset-creation projects – rainwater harvesting for human and livestock use, soil and water conservation, rehabilitation of degraded land and the production of drought-tolerant crops – are aimed at improving the resilience of drought-affected communities and increasing food sufficiency. In May 2011, ActionAid's field office in Isiolo was upgraded to become the NGO's regional office for the whole of North-East Kenya when the regional office relocated from Embu.

At the time the field work for this learning review was conducted (March 2012), ActionAid was distributing WFP food to an estimated 90,000 people in Isiolo County every month (nearly 60% of the population). This was up from 45,000 in May 2011, when infoasaid carried out an initial scoping trip. A severe drought was the reason for a near-doubling of the number of food aid recipients during the course of infoasaid's work.

ActionAid's food security operations involve several stakeholders: ActionAid staff in the Isiolo office, ActionAid Field Officers (FO), Relief Committee (RC) members, and members of the District Steering Group (DSG).

The ActionAid office in Isiolo liaises with the local communities it serves through 21 full-time Field Officers deployed across the county. FOs are considered the eyes and ears of ActionAid on the ground.

FO's perform a number of roles including:

- Monitoring food distribution;
- Overseeing food distributions to the communities and ensuring they receive the correct quantities;
- Monitoring ActionAid community projects;
- Identifying vulnerable community members, in collaboration with local leaders;
- Writing field reports;

- Training Relief Committee members in data collection, the preparation of registers and providing systematic feedback from the communities to FOs.

Each FO is responsible for a number of food distribution points (FDPs) within the community. FDPs are central points where aid is distributed to affected communities. There were 75 FDPs in Isiolo as of March 2012.

Relief committees (RCs) act as a link between ActionAid headquarters staff, the FOs and the community. RC members live in the community, are recipients of relief aid, and are elected by the community. The number of RCs varies according to the number of food aid recipients in an area and the distance between villages.

Each RC has a head and a secretary, both of whom represent a given FDP. The RC head and/or secretary are expected to be semi-literate (this is not always the case) and perform a number of roles, including:

- Participating in the selection of relief aid recipients;
- Preparing registers of community members who receive food aid;
- Providing the community with information on when food will be distributed;
- Checking the register and calling out names during distribution;
- Distributing food;
- Counting and checking the amount of food that has been delivered;
- Informing ActionAid about the welfare of the communities.

The DSG members are officials who work in government ministries. Each DSG brings together representatives of the government line ministries, the police, aid agencies, and religious and community organizations. They are responsible for monitoring activities of humanitarian organizations on behalf of the government. DSG members aim at coordinating activities between humanitarian agencies and the government. They provide technical advice to these agencies on activities they are implementing, and any other support these agencies might need from the government.

ActionAid exchanges information and coordinates action with the government and other aid agencies at a local level through the three DSGs in Isiolo. There is also one separate steering group for each of the three administrative districts in the County. However, the only active DSG in Isiolo County in mid-2011 was the one covering Isiolo District which met fortnightly and had about 20 regular members.

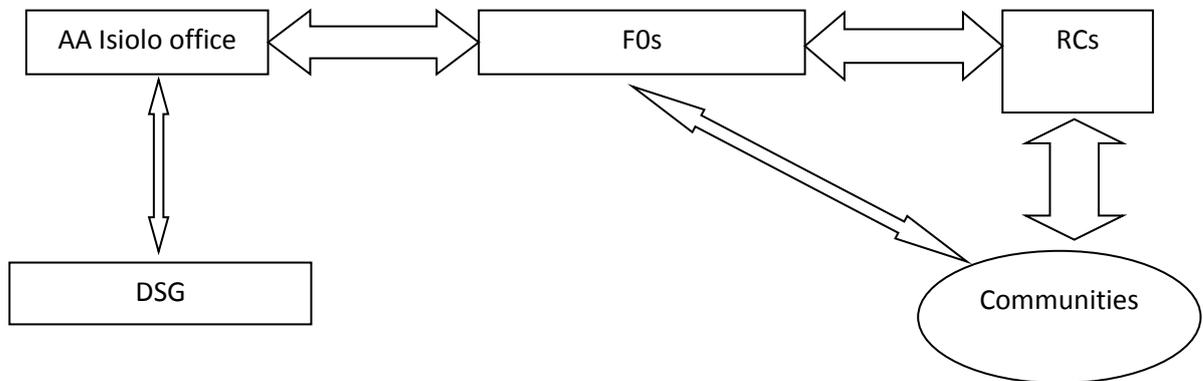
Prior communication practices with crisis-affected communities

In June 2011 infoasaid undertook a baseline study which would form the basis for measuring change over time of the communications project in Isiolo. At that time, ActionAid's only tool for communicating with food-aid recipients was through its network of FOs. Most communication with FOs from the Isiolo office took place via mobile phones. However, in instances where an FO could not be reached by mobile phone, ActionAid staff based in the Isiolo office travelled to conduct face-to-face meetings with FOs and/or RCs.

FOs were responsible for transmitting information received from the Isiolo office to the RCs, who would then relay the information to community members. Since only a few RCs had access to a mobile phone, FOs usually hired a 4WD vehicle or motorbike to visit RCs and convey information face-to-face. Depending on the number of RCs within a food distribution area and how scattered they were, the

communication could take 2-6 days to complete. For many FOs, who typically received information about food distributions at short notice, there was not enough lead time for them to communicate with all the RCs and their community members.

Diagram 1: Information flows from ActionAid Isiolo office to community members prior to implementation of the communications project



Four key findings from the baseline study:

- **Communication flows between ActionAid and drought-affected communities were generally effective but slow and labour-intensive.** Most information exchange took place through face-to-face meetings.
- **Owing to poor road conditions, security incidents, and the time required to meet with RCs who may be in various locations, FOs were sometimes unable to communicate critical information in time.** Focus group participants, for example, complained of food distribution trucks arriving without any prior information, resulting in long food distributions due to a lack of community preparation and absent recipients. In some instances, community members also expressed frustration when children unexpectedly had to abandon their classrooms to inform their parents of a truck’s arrival.
- **The major communication challenge occurred between ActionAid’s FOs and RCs.** Since very few RCs owned telephones (approximately 30%), or the means to charge them, FOs were rarely able to communicate with them via voice call or text. Instead, they often travelled long distances, sometimes several days, to pass information on to committee members. Consequently, any last minute changes were usually not communicated in time.
- ActionAid staff in the Isiolo office remarked that the current communication system limited their interaction with local communities because they were obliged to pass information through a third party, namely an FO. **Limited community engagement focused more on extracting information on project outputs rather than listening to communities’ needs and concerns.**
- With food security worsening in the summer of 2011, and the number of people in need of food aid rising, **there was increased pressure on**

ActionAid to ensure fast and reliable communication with local populations.

3. infoasaid's project proposal

Under the aegis of infoasaid's global partnership with ActionAid, infoasaid's Local Media Officer visited Kenya from April 27 to May 12, 2011 to review ActionAid's communication with the drought-affected population of North Eastern Kenya and make recommendations for improvement. Working closely with ActionAid Team Leader for North Eastern Kenya, infoasaid developed a proposal for a pilot communications project to be conducted in Isiolo County.

The project proposal had three principal objectives:

Improving communication as a means of improving the delivery of ActionAid's food assistance

- 1) To improve the effectiveness of ActionAid's humanitarian assistance in Isiolo County through systematic, fast, and reliable communication between the organization and the communities it serves.
- 2) To enhance ActionAid's monitoring and reporting by means of improved data collection.

Information as a form of aid

- 3) To provide communities with vital information that could improve their livelihoods.

Interventions

To realize the overall objectives outlined above, infoasaid proposed **three** interventions:

1. The use of mobile telephony, coupled with FrontlineSMS software, to improve the effectiveness of two-way communication between ActionAid and recipients of food aid.

Intended outcomes, articulated in focus-group discussions with ActionAid staff and community members:

- Members of the community are able to communicate with ActionAid more rapidly and effectively through their RC members who use the mobile phones and solar chargers to communicate regularly with FOs (RCs and community members may also contact the FrontlineSMS hub in Isiolo directly).
- ActionAid's food distributions run more smoothly since RCs are informed of upcoming deliveries and are able to prepare the community on time.
- Travel to deliver routine information to RCs is reduced for FOs, saving ActionAid time and money.

- Overall coordination between stakeholders involved in humanitarian activities at the Isiolo County-level is improved, as ActionAid shares vital information received from RCs with members of the DSG during fortnightly meetings.

2. The use of Frontline Forms to electronically gather data from the field. FOs are responsible for filling in the forms and sending them back to the Isiolo office on a weekly basis.

Intended outcomes, articulated by ActionAid staff:

- Time saved, compared to manually writing down information or inputting information into a computer;
- Faster reporting of data and analysis of trends.

3. The use of FrontlineSMS, Freedom Fone and price bulletins (posted on notice boards) to disseminate weekly livestock and commodity pricing information, as well as key humanitarian information, to communities.

Intended outcomes, as articulated in focus group discussions by ActionAid staff and community members:

- Pastoralists use the information to achieve better prices for animals that they sell, thereby boosting cash household income.
- The humanitarian information provided alongside market prices supports the well-being of drought-affected populations.
- Poor rural families receive information about prices for essential foodstuffs, enabling them to better decide where and when to buy products. Community members often have information about food prices in nearby smaller markets. The project provided prices for the Isiolo market, the largest market in the area.
- Farmers growing cash crops on irrigated land, as in FFA activities, have a better idea of the price they could expect for their produce.

The ActionAid staff suggested that prices for tomatoes, onions and water melons be included in the weekly reports.

The project proposal required five subactivities:

1. The purchase and distribution of 250 mobile phones and solar chargers to RC members.
2. The purchase and distribution of 30 Java-enabled mobile phones to ActionAid FOs, staff in the Isiolo office, warehouse managers, food distribution truck drivers and three DSG members.
3. The installation of a FrontlineSMS hub at the ActionAid's Isiolo office.
4. The installation of a Freedom Fone voice message service.
5. The training of ActionAid staff on FrontlineSMS, FrontlineForms, Freedom Fone, the development of key messages, responding to feedback, and the dissemination of market pricing information on bulletin boards.

The costs associated with the pilot project are approximately £27,000. This includes the procurement of all equipment and infoaid travel for the scoping trip, technical training, the learning review, and filming.

4. Purpose of the learning review

4.1 Objective

The aim of this learning review is to identify and document lessons from the infoaid/AAIK communications project in Isiolo County, June 2011 to March 2012. **The review's purpose is first and foremost to contribute to the sector's understanding of whether/how communicating with crisis-affected communities influences the quality of humanitarian assistance.**

It is important to note that this review does not constitute an external evaluation of ActionAid, infoaid, or of the communications project they sought to implement. Rather it is a self-review.

Two overarching questions guided the learning review:

- What did each infoaid response seek to do? What happened? What worked well, what didn't work well, and why?
- How, if at all, did the communications project influence the overall humanitarian response?

The first question focuses on the **implementation process**, providing an overview of what each intervention sought to achieve and what actually happened. By looking at what happened and why, the learning review seeks to promote learning regarding how aid agencies share information with, and listen to, those affected by a crisis.

The second question considers the **overall results** of the communications project, specifically looking at its impact on ActionAid's humanitarian assistance in Isiolo.

To answer this second question, the learning review turned to the five Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria developed by the OECD. The criteria have been a strong foundation for international development evaluation since 1991 and are widely used for aid evaluations by bilateral and multilateral donor agencies. More recently, attempts have been made to adapt the DAC criteria to the humanitarian sector.

The learning review has selected the criteria most appropriate to the evaluation of the project's impact on the aid delivered by ActionAid. For each criterion, a question has been developed to assess whether/how the communications project improved the humanitarian assistance delivered by ActionAid.

1. Relevance/Appropriateness:

- *To what extent did the stated objectives correctly address the problems and real needs of the target groups?*
- *To what extent has the communications project enabled ActionAid to better align its activities with the needs and priorities of the target group?*

2. **Coverage:**
 - *To what extent has the communications project enhanced ActionAid's ability to reach population groups in need?*
3. **Effectiveness:**
 - *To what extent has the communications project influenced the achievement of the organization's programme objective?*
4. **Efficiency:**
 - *To what extent has the communications project influenced the time and cost-efficiency of ActionAid's programmes?*
5. **Impact:**
 - *What are the wider effects of the project, intended and unintended, on the target community? What real difference has the project made to community members?*

4.2 Methodology

In order to determine the value of the project for the affected community, the guiding philosophy of the learning review was to listen to the perspective of various stakeholders involved in ActionAid's humanitarian assistance in Isiolo, including the organization's staff there as well as RC members and the communities themselves.

The method for this learning review consisted of:

- A review of any literature on humanitarian response activities, including programme reports and monitoring reports;
- Focus group discussions with members of the RCs;
- Focus group discussions with community members (single-gender and mixed groups);
- Key informant interviews with ActionAid's FOs;
- Key informant interviews with ActionAid staff in the Isiolo and Nairobi office. The sampling frame included staff who had participated in the pilot project including the Project Coordinator, the Regional Accountant, the Data Officer, and the former FFA Technical Officer.

In total, over 70 discussants participated in nine focus group discussions in three locations: Kinna, Garba Tula, and Oldonyiro.

Eleven key informant interviews were conducted with FOs, and staff in the Isiolo and Nairobi office. The discussions used a semi-structured interview technique.

4.3 Research limitations

Four important constraints limited infoasaid's research for the learning review.

First, there was a **lack of available quantitative data** available from ActionAid. This limited infoasaid's ability to analyse several aspects of the project, including its reach and cost implications. For example, infoasaid could not obtain data regarding the financial implications of the communications project on ActionAid's transport budget.

infoasaid attempted to source this information through qualitative interviews, but the information obtained was vague and changing.

The lack of quantitative data has been a significant constraint when assessing the project's overall impact and something that needs to be addressed as the project continues.

Second, **the on-going security situation in Isiolo limited travel to certain areas.** This meant we could not return to some of the villages where the original baseline was conducted.

Third, due to time constraints, the research team was not able to travel to areas located long distances away from Isiolo town centre, such as Merti or Sericho. As such, the fieldwork therefore does not reflect the geographic diversity of Isiolo County.

Lastly, weekly monitoring reports were sometimes sporadic and lacking in detail, resulting in a delay in time taken to resolve problems, particularly technical issues.

It is also important to note that the learning review took place nine months after the infoasaid training for ActionAid staff in June 2011. The results outlined in this review are therefore only for the short term, i.e., immediately after the programme. In the long term, some behavioural changes may occur but they may only be observed several years after the programme was implemented.

In spite of these constraints, the learning review provides some useful insights regarding the success and challenges of the communications project, its impact on affected communities, and its overall support of ActionAid's humanitarian assistance programme in Isiolo. It is hoped that these findings will serve as the starting point for the design of a more in-depth evaluation in the future and for on-going discussions regarding the expansion of this type of work in other communities served by ActionAid.

5. Learning review findings

5.1 What did the infoasaid/ActionAid communications project set out to achieve and what actually occurred? What worked? What didn't work?

To understand what worked well and what did not, this section provides an overview of each activity that was proposed, what it was supposed to achieve, and what actually happened. (This section focuses on the implementation process rather than on the project's results, which are discussed in the next section.)

The implementation of the communications project required five distinct activities including one week of training by infoasaid for ActionAid staff in Isiolo.

5.1.1 The distribution and use of mobile phones and solar chargers

ActionAid distributed 250 Nokia 1280 phones and 250 solar chargers to members of the RCs throughout Isiolo County. The criteria used to select RC members who would receive the equipment were: the lack of a mobile handset and/or solar charger within the RC, access to a mobile phone network (in the community or within walking

distance), and the ability to read and write. Relying on ActionAid for assessment and identification of recipients proved an efficient way of proceeding.

When designing the project, the infoasaid team expected that RC members who received a solar charger would request a small fee from community members who wished to charge their personal handsets. RCs would use the income generated from the solar chargers to purchase phone credit.

ActionAid also distributed 30 Java-enabled phones to 16 FOs. Java-enabled phones support FrontlineForms, which can be used to collect key operational data from the field. The remaining phones were distributed to ActionAid's warehouse staff, drivers, the project coordinator, the field coordinator and three members of the DSG.

During the focus group discussions, FOs and RC members remarked that the handsets worked well, were easy to use, and were generally robust. **In contrast, many RC members complained that the solar panel chargers started to deteriorate within a few months of use.**

In nearly all of the examples provided by RCs, the solar panels could barely charge one handset per day, as opposed to the two or three phones initially envisaged. During an infoasaid mid-project review (October 2011), RC members in one location had actually stopped using the solar chargers and were walking to the nearest village to charge their handsets.

The deterioration of the solar chargers has become a significant problem, given their critical role in an area with very little access to electricity. infoasaid attempted to resolve this issue in October 2011 by talking to the solar-panel manufacturer in Nairobi, but did not find a satisfactory outcome to the problem. It has not yet been determined whether the problems stem from product failure, maintenance issues, or mistakes made when first initializing the solar charger. Experiences from other infoasaid-supported projects point at product failure.

In the sites visited by infoasaid, researchers did not come across any RCs who charged community members for use of the solar chargers. The research team is not entirely clear why this was the case but thinks that one reason may be that the deficient chargers were not able to charge more than one phone per day.

Use of the mobile phones by community members was determined by different procedures in the communities visited. In most cases, the community member was asked to insert his/her SIM card in the RC mobile handset. In other instances, the community member had to provide top-up credit to use the mobile phone. In one area visited, the RCs had decided that the elderly would be allowed to use the phones for free. In all of the sites visited, RCs asserted that community members were able to use the handsets free of charge during emergencies. A few RCs referred to the handsets as "work phones", making the distinction between them and personal handsets.

In every RC focus group, participants asked for more phones to be distributed to RCs that had not received any, as well as for new solar chargers.

It is interesting to note that the research did not come across any community members or RCs requesting financial assistance, such as phone credit, to use the handsets, perhaps an indication of the high value attributed to the use of the mobile phones.

5.1.2 FrontlineSMS

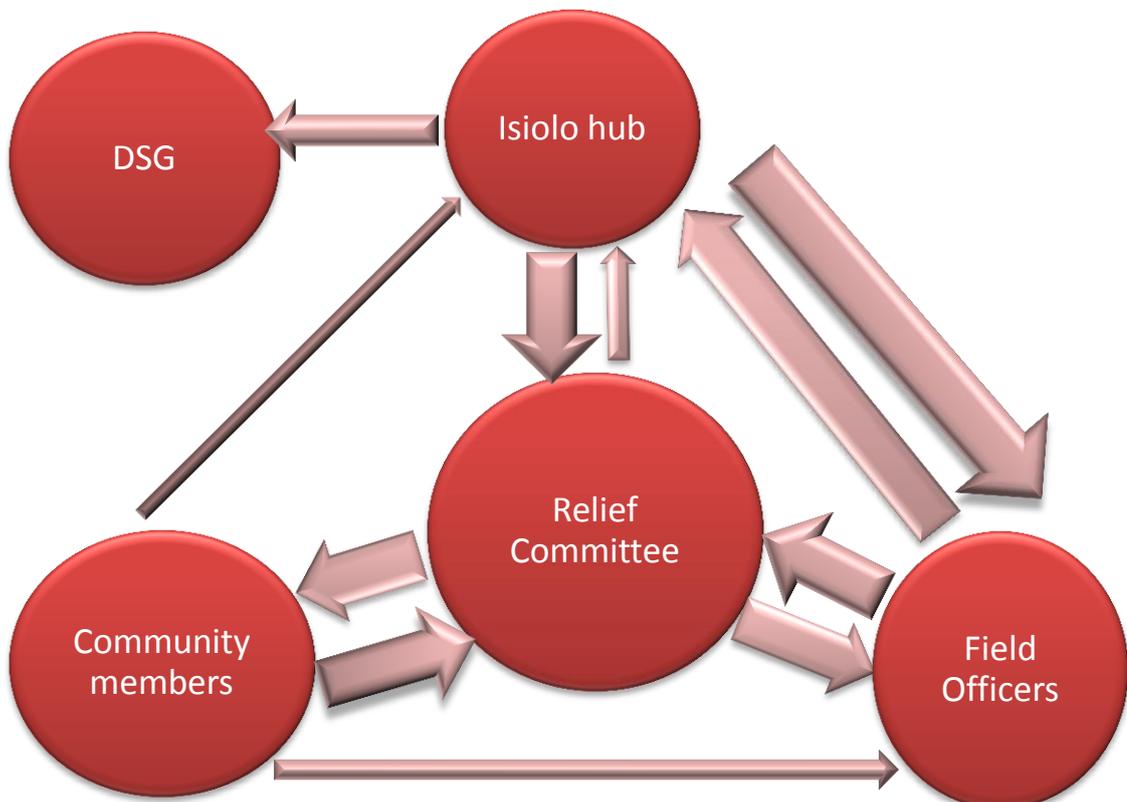
FrontlineSMS allows the same text message to be sent to large groups of people from a computer linked to a mobile phone line. It also allows incoming messages to be monitored and the numbers of all those who have sent texts to be logged and captured for future use. FrontlineSMS can be used for both closed user groups and open communication systems that are available to the wider public.

infoasaid proposed the use of FrontlineSMS software as a tool for disseminating information quickly to RCs, FOs, and any other key stakeholders in ActionAid's humanitarian assistance programmes in Isiolo. In addition, any texts received by the community would automatically be recorded in a database, enabling ActionAid to analyse, verify, and ultimately respond to questions or problems.

It is important to note that sending large numbers of text messages was greatly facilitated by Safaricom's attractive pricing structure, which proposed a fee of 10 Kenyan Shillings per day for an unlimited amount of texts. (Safaricom is a well-established Kenyan mobile phone service provider.)

As illustrated in Diagram 2, the mobile phones and FrontlineSMS software empower RCs to be a central point for exchange of information with several stakeholders. There now exists a direct link between the ActionAid office in Isiolo and the RCs and communication between RCs and FOs has increased due to the mobile handsets which allow the two groups to speak to each-other whenever necessary.

Diagram 2: Information flow from the ActionAid Isiolo office to communities via FOs and RCs (the thickness of the arrow depicts the frequency of communication)



ActionAid appointed the data Officer/PRRO Administrative Assistant in the Isiolo office to run the FrontlineSMS hub. She received one week of training on the software in June 2011, along with ActionAid's FOs.

As of March 2012, the ActionAid Data Officer was using FrontlineSMS regularly, sending approximately 10-12 messages per week to RCs, FOs, and other ActionAid staff. The content of most messages was about food distribution activities (i.e. work performed under the FFA programme, food delivery truck schedules) as well as pricing information for commodities and livestock from the Isiolo market.

In addition, SMS texts were flowing to the data officer in Isiolo. She estimated receiving 25-30 SMS messages per week with information ranging from acknowledgement of food distributions, to questions about project activities, requests for assistance and general information exchange about important events in their community, such as the security situation. The Data Officer remarked that some communities provide travel advice for ActionAid's food delivery trucks based on the state of the roads or security incidents. Also, some RCs themselves have also started to provide ActionAid with pricing information for livestock and commodities in markets near to them.

While it is clear that there is now a two-way exchange of information between ActionAid and RCs, it was difficult to ascertain the number of RCs who communicate with the Isiolo office, as well as the frequency of communication.

At the time of the learning review (March 2012) there were 1,500 SMS messages received on the FrontlineSMS database, averaging five messages per day. The Data Officer estimated that while some RCs were regularly texting the ActionAid office, others had not contacted the office. Due to time constraints, the research team could not travel to areas, such as parts of Merti that were not communicating with the ActionAid office. It was thus not possible to understand the causes for this silence, such as a lack of mobile network coverage, equipment failure, unease with texting or lack of mobile telephone credit. The lack of communication may also be attributed to the fact that RCs traditionally communicate with their FOs rather than the Isiolo office. **The communications project was not meant to bypass the FOs but to provide a supplementary point of contact at ActionAid when necessary.**

5.1.3 FrontlineForms

To support ActionAid's reporting and monitoring activities, infoasaid also trained staff in the use of FrontlineForms. FrontlineForms enable the quick collection of time-sensitive data from the field. During infoasaid's one week training in June 2011, ActionAid staff in the Isiolo office and FOs learned how to design and fill in FrontlineForms.

As of March 2012, FOs were required to complete three forms per month, all related to food distributions and the FFA programme. The Data Officer estimates that 11 of the 16 FOs are regularly sending back information via FrontlineForms. The other 5 phones have been experiencing technical problems including the burning of one phone during a village raid.

The FOs interviewed all appreciated the forms, which they found very easy and quick to complete. The Data Officer in the Isiolo office also valued the electronic forms, which provides her with data for reporting requirements in a timely and secure manner. She explained that prior to the communications project data had been collected on sheets of paper that were transported to the Isiolo office in food

distribution trucks. This information therefore arrived only once the distributions had been completed. It was sometimes lost in the transport, and always had to be manually entered into the computer. Accordingly, before FrontlineForms were introduced, the collection of critical information for FFA activities could take a couple of weeks to complete.

Despite the success of FrontlineForms, ActionAid staff have yet to introduce new forms. In October 2011, for example, infoasaid staff helped design a new form for nutritional data collection during a visit to the Isiolo office. In March 2012, the form had yet to be implemented, apparently due to a lack of training of FOs on this specific subject.

5.1.4 Freedom Fone

Given the low levels of literacy in Isiolo and general evidence that communications projects are most effective when multiple communication channels are used to disseminate the same information, infoasaid proposed the installation of an information telephone line with Freedom Fone technology that anyone from Isiolo County could call.

Freedom Fone allows a computer linked to one or more mobile phone lines to operate a telephone information service. Callers hear a welcome message that gives access to a menu of recorded messages. The welcome message also allows callers to the information service to leave their own recorded message.

The project proposal suggested that ActionAid record livestock and commodity price information along with any other humanitarian information they wished to pass along to the communities the agency served. The recordings would be updated on a weekly basis and the phone number to call would be advertised on bulletins posted in public places.

In the initial phases of the project, two Freedom Fone lines were established; one for the RCs and one for the community members. Each phone line contained three recorded messages and a leave-a-message option.

A review of the communications project in October 2011 highlighted there was very little use of the Freedom Fone line. The call logs showed that between July 7 and October 4, 2011 188 calls had been made to the information line reserved for RC members. Discounting test calls made by ActionAid and infoasaid staff; this amounted to an average of about one call per day. Five voice messages had been left on the line over this period, of which only one was audible. During the same three month period, only 73 calls had been made to the public Freedom Fone information line number.

Discussions with ActionAid staff suggested three possible reasons for the low usage rates: the RCs were not using Freedom Fone because they were able to obtain the same information via SMS messages, community members were not using the phone line due to a lack of awareness, and Kenyans in general do not frequently use recorded voice service.

The mid-term project review prompted a few changes to promote the use of Freedom Fone, including increased publicity about the availability of this service and a consolidated number for RCs and community members. However, as of March 2012, there had still been very little use of the Freedom Fone hotline.

The interviews and focus group discussions in March 2012 revealed that significant challenges continue to hinder greater use of Freedom Fone.

- **Technical problems** routinely plagued the Freedom Fone hotline since implementation in Isiolo in June 2011. The system appears vulnerable to power outages and is often in need of technical assistance from ActionAid's Nairobi office to restart the connection. At the time of this review (March 2012), the hotline had not been functional for over three months. As such, it was impossible to see how many phone calls were logged onto the system.
- **Strong cultural resistance** recorded voice messages was evident in several communities visited. RCs and community members explained how they distrusted information received from a recorded message, with one discussant even wondering if a "ghost" was speaking. The few messages left on the ActionAid voicemail clearly indicated that the caller was not aware of how the service functioned.
- **Freedom Fone is not financially attractive** compared to other methods for obtaining the same information. The Freedom Fone hotline requires that the caller use phone credit to hear the recorded messages. This is a more expensive option compared to receiving the information via text, or word-of-mouth. Moreover, because callers are not familiar with the recorded message system, many will wait for long periods of time before hanging up. As a result, of the few who had tried using the phone line, some had wasted substantial amounts of phone credit, thus naturally concluding, "*Voice mail is very expensive!*"
- **Local languages are preferred** by some focus group discussants, even though they noted that most community members would understand some Swahili, the language used in the Freedom Fone recorded messages.

The Freedom Fone line was created in order to make vital information accessible to any member of Isiolo County, above and beyond the literate recipients of ActionAid's humanitarian assistance and those community members able to read the pricing bulletins posted in public areas (see section below). **The substantial challenges described above, however, limit the effectiveness of the Freedom Fone line in this particular context, and demand a discussion about its continued operation.**

5.1.5 The dissemination of market price information

An information needs-assessment conducted by infoasaid in May 2010 revealed that drought-affected communities in Isiolo had little or no information regarding the prices of livestock in nearby markets.

Pastoralists had to rely on information from traders to determine whether, when and for how much to sell, without any knowledge of whether or not they were receiving a fair price. The pastoralists sometimes endured the long journey with their animals to Isiolo market, only to learn that buying prices were low. However, they might still be forced to sell because the animals were too weak to make the return trip home.

For pastoralists, such a lack of information substantially increases the risk that they will undersell their products. For consumers, the information asymmetry might result in price differences for the same or similar products in markets that are geographically close to each other.

As a result of the information-needs assessment, ActionAid and infoasaid decided to provide drought-affected communities with weekly information about livestock prices in Isiolo market. The purpose was to help drought-distressed pastoralists achieve better prices for animals that they sell – thereby boosting cash household income for the pastoralists. The information given alongside the market prices would also help improve the health of their herds and therefore the human population that depends on them.

The weekly market price information project was designed to allow information to flow from the Kenya Livestock Marketing Council to the ActionAid Data Officer in Isiolo. The Data Officer, in turn, would record a voice message on the Freedom Fone line and also transmit the information via FrontlineSMS to FOs and RC. The FOs and RCs would then write the market price information onto a template bulletin form which would be posted on a public noticeboard (see figure below).



infoasaid had envisaged that these bulletins would be posted by ActionAid Field Officers in the first instance. However, during the infoasaid training in June 2011, ActionAid staff said the bulletins should be distributed by RCs with mobile phones, as well. If implemented in full, this project would see the market information bulletins posted in more than 200 locations in Isiolo County each week.

During the training, ActionAid staff inspired by the livestock information bulletin, proposed the creation of a second weekly bulletin to inform rural communities about

the price of staple food commodities in Isiolo market. There were two main objectives behind supplying food commodity prices in Isiolo to rural communities:

1. To provide poor rural families with market price information for essential foodstuffs so that they could be better informed about where to purchase goods.
2. To give farmers growing cash crops on irrigated land a better idea of the price they could expect for their produce. Weekly price information is provided for tomatoes, onions, maize flour, Mwitmania beans, rice, sugar, vegetable oil, cabbage, kale, and potatoes.

Findings from the learning review indicate that community members are receiving and using the weekly pricing information, but not in the way the project was initially designed.

As noted in the previous section, the Freedom Fone communication channel has not performed well for a variety of technical, financial, and cultural reasons. **The research did not come across anyone who had heard of market prices through the Freedom Fone telephone line.**

In contrast, the FrontlineSMS communication channel is functioning well, with the Data Officer regularly sending out market price information to FOs and RCs who then transcribe the information onto pre-formatted templates and post the bulletins in public spaces. It was, however, not possible to obtain figures regarding the number of FOs and RCs who regularly perform this task. A mid-project review by infoasaid in October 2011 estimated that perhaps 30% of RCs regularly transcribed and posted the pricing information. A few RCs complained that they sometimes ran out of the templates to post the information. ActionAid recognized that this problem could easily be solved by ensuring that food distribution trucks contained templates for RCs.

Most focus group participants interviewed at the community level were aware of the pricing information provided by ActionAid but all said they received this information orally rather than through the bulletins. Community members explained that when RCs received the SMS text, they relayed the information during FFA activities or community meetings. The communication of information through word of mouth appeared to function well and was preferred over the bulletins (at least for the communities interviewed).. This may be due to low levels of literacy within the community as well as a natural preference for traditional means of obtaining information.

Given that most community members receive market-price information via the FOs or RCs, it might seem unnecessary to continue transcribing the information onto bulletins. However, discussions with a few ActionAid stakeholders indicated a desire to continue posting the information publicly as a way of providing vital information to all members of the community rather than only to ActionAid's food aid recipients.

While the market-price bulletins were primarily aimed at helping community members achieve better market prices in their negotiations with dealers who buy in outlying communities, they were also expected to serve as an effective vehicle for delivering other key messages developed by ActionAid. **Interviews with ActionAid staff, RCs, and community members, however, highlighted that the weekly bulletins are rarely used to disseminate other critical information for the drought-affected communities.** To encourage further use of this communication tool, the Data Officer responsible for dispatching this information would need greater support from ActionAid's management regarding what key messages to disseminate to the population.

5.2 How, if at all, did the communications project influence the overall humanitarian response?

5.2.1 Relevance/Appropriateness

5.2.1.1 To what extent did the communications project correctly address the problems and real needs of the target group?

The focus group discussions with RCs and community members indicate they perceived the communications project to be highly relevant to their lives. They felt the project addressed some of their problems, especially with regards to food distributions and market-price information.

During the baseline study, RCs and community members described their frustrations over the lack of timely and regular information about monthly food distributions. Because communities were not always informed of a truck's arrival, necessary preparations such as the updating of registers, mobilizing of community members to offload food, and the preparation of appropriate containers to receive food rations, could not take place in advance. As a result, delivery trucks sometimes had to stay overnight for all of the required operations to take place. Furthermore, during the baseline study a few community members described their frustrations about children having to leave their classrooms in search of their parents when a food truck arrived.

According to focus group participants, the launch of the communications project has dramatically improved the information flow regarding monthly food distributions and this has had a positive impact on overall operations. RCs and community members spontaneously noted that they usually receive an SMS text from the Isiolo office informing them of an upcoming food distribution 48 hours prior to the truck's arrival. RCs often confirm this information, via text or by voice, with the FO responsible for their food distribution point, and then begin the necessary preparations and mobilization of community members.

When asked how this specific intervention had affected their lives, community members noted that they could now better organize their time, that food distributions were finished in a few hours rather than in an entire day, and that children no longer had to leave school to search for their parents when a food truck arrived.

"There is a big change now. Long before, food used to stay overnight because there was no communication. Now we get information immediately, even when the trucks are still in Isiolo. We are aware that food is arriving soon, and we get ready for distribution." – Community member, Oldonyiro

“Now, there are no more times when the food truck arrives before we get the information. We get information yesterday and the food arrives today or tomorrow. Even when they are loading the food in Isiolo, they send the message to us.” – Community member, Oldonyiro

“There has been a big difference because, in the past, we would just see the trucks arriving and most of us might have gone to other place to attend to other work. But now, with the information we get two days or one day before the distribution time, we can put off some of our jobs and come to collect food. We even know when the tracks are leaving Isiolo.” – Community member, Garba Tula

“People get the information in advance. They come to collect their food at the right time. Even someone who is occupied can delegate the task to someone else.” – Community member, Kinna

Another need described by community members during the infoasaid scoping trip (May 2011) was market price information for livestock. As noted earlier, because drought-affected communities had little or no information regarding market prices, they often relied on middlemen to buy their livestock, without any knowledge of whether or not they were receiving a fair price. At other times, pastoralists were obliged to sell their animals even if market prices were low, because the health of their animals prevented them from making the return journey home.

“If we can get other means of information, then we can ask for market prices before going to the market. After that, we can compare with what the brokers are offering and decide if it’s worth to go to the market and sell to them. This would help us bargain with the brokers... Right now, we don’t have mobile phones, radio and newspapers, so we are completely cut off from this information.” – Community member, (Baseline report)

In response, infoasaid proposed providing affected communities with weekly information about livestock and commodity prices in Isiolo market, so as to help drought-distressed communities achieve better prices for both livestock and commodities that they buy and sell.

Comments from RCs and community members clearly attest that the weekly market pricing information is considered relevant, important, and useful. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that, for some members, the information is being used to boost household income.

Several interesting stories emerged during focus group discussions including cases of market arbitrage, where community members pooled their resources to buy less-expensive livestock in Isiolo and to re-sell them at a higher price in the market nearest to them. RC members who were not literate explained that their children interpreted the SMS from the Isiolo office.

“I don’t know how to read and write, but when I get the SMS coming to the phone, I talk to my daughter to read for me. I have onions on my farm and this assists me to know how much to sell them for.”-RC member, Kinna

“One day a man came and asked me if I had received any message from Isiolo, I told him “Yes, I have received livestock prices and commodity prices”. He asked, “How is the livestock price in Isiolo”? I told him that I thought the prices were low. He then immediately called other people in Nanyuki and told them how the market was in Isiolo, so that they could go to buy and sell in other towns. He then called another person in Isiolo to confirm the price of a medium cow. He was told the exact price and decided to buy so that he could sell at higher price in other towns. Sometimes some

people send money through M-pesa [a mobile-phone based money transfer service in Kenya] to other people in Isiolo so that they can buy for them.” -RC member, Oldonyiro

“When I go to the field, I find the bulletin boards complete with the information about livestock and commodity prices. I have seen the bulletin boards. Community members have the information. They will tell you the price of a cow at this date. And they compare this with other markets. For Kinna, they have another market called Maua. They will compare with Maua market. The information is useful and relevant to the community.” – ActionAid Field Officer

“Most communities here trade livestock, so they will ask RC if they have received market information about livestock prices. They then come to Isiolo town to sell livestock. I just experienced this during the opening of schools. They sell livestock to earn the school fees. At that time, they have to analyse the market prices. Either they sell before school opens, because prices are high, or after schools open. During the opening of schools, there is a lot of livestock on the market and prices are down.” – ActionAid Field Officer

A few community members demonstrated a sense of empowerment since no longer having to depend on middle-men for information. In one community where pastoralists were increasingly farming the land as part of FFA activities, community members requested more pricing information for farming inputs, like fertilizer and seeds.

There were a few comments which suggest that aid recipients receive market pricing information at different times, according to when they see the RCs. As noted earlier (please see section on dissemination of market price information), information is distributed mainly through word-of-mouth from the RCs to community members. As such, community members who participate in FFA activities and engage with RCs on an almost daily basis are sure to receive information in a timely manner. But other aid recipients, such as those who only receive monthly food distributions, will have much less contact with the RCs and will have to actively seek out the information themselves.

“The information goes to the RCs and then the lucky ones are the FFA target community members, because they meet and get the information right there. The ones without FFA work only meet when there are food distributions. So they may not receive information except for at community meetings.” – ActionAid Field Officer

In addition, while most community members seemed to be benefiting from the market price information, further research should be undertaken to identify exactly who is receiving and using the information.

“This information benefits the traders who buy and sell the livestock. The majority of those who are traders are men, although we have a women’s group that does the trade of buying and selling of livestock.” – RC Member, Kinna

“Most of the people who benefit are the traders who use the prices to decide whether to go and purchase or not.” – RC Member, Oldonyiro

“For the livestock, it is the owners who benefit. If the owner is the head of the family, he will not be as interested in the commodities, but the women will be. They will compare sugar in Isiolo to sugar in Raap market.” – ActionAid staff, Isiolo

In addition to improved information around FFA activities, specifically food distributions and market prices for livestock, community members requested more information on a variety of topics. During the baseline study, they provided the interviewer with a long list of topics they would like to receive information about. The most popular were:

- Alternative sources of livelihoods;
- Education;
- Livestock prices;
- Weather patterns;
- Sources of pasture and water for their animals;
- The security situation in different parts of the district.

They also wanted information on health facilities, on what to do in order to lead healthier lives, and how to manage with little water. In general, comments from community members revealed they felt isolated and uninformed.

“We don’t have this information because we don’t have radios, mobile phones and can’t access newspapers, so we are cut off from information.” – Community member, (Baseline report)

As of March 2012, most of these information needs had yet to be met. This may be because the information requested was not related to ActionAid’s activities in Isiolo. In other cases, the information may be linked to ActionAid’s programme but has yet to be disseminated through the new communication channels.

FOs and few staff in the Isiolo office asserted that the communication tools should be further exploited to provide community members with key information. However, without support from senior management, in Isiolo and Nairobi, the Data Officer was reluctant to issue information that is not strictly related to the PRRO programme.

“We need to improve on the bulletins. We should be providing more information, not just livestock or commodity prices. We can get information from community level and then the hub can send it on to everyone. For example, there was an outbreak of cholera in one area. This kind of flow of information is very important. We need to mobilize more information from the RCs to the hub and from the hub to the rest of the RCs.” – ActionAid Field Officer

5.2.1.2 To what extent has the communications project enabled ActionAid to better align its activities with the needs and priorities of the target group?

One of the challenges faced by ActionAid in Isiolo prior to the communications project was the lack of effective engagement with the people they served.

Communication with RCs and community members was labour-intensive, irregular, and generally limited to discussions about food distribution activities. ActionAid staff interviewed for the baseline research expressed frustration at the lack of regular and

timely communication with the communities they served in Isiolo. They felt that if they could receive timely and regular information from the communities, they could better target ActionAid's assistance in Isiolo.

The in-depth interviews and focus group discussions indicate that the communications project had created a direct channel of communication between communities and ActionAid that did not exist previously. **All ActionAid staff interviewed felt a greater sense of engagement with the communities they serve.**

The FOs, who are enthusiastic supporters of the project, provided several examples of this enhanced dialogue, which they asserted had led to greater trust and improved relations with community members. They explained how they were now in almost daily contact with RCs, which enabled ActionAid staff to quickly address questions and concerns.

"Now we speak one-to-one. If there is a problem at the community level, even if it the issue is not related to food, we get the information. We hear about disease outbreaks, information on when it will rain, and so forth. In the past, we had to travel and we would sometimes only hear from local admin, but now we hear from the communities themselves. We have a direct link." – ActionAid staff, Isiolo office

Discussions with RCs and FOs reveal that in some cases, the mobile phones and solar chargers had enabled community members to be more active in their own recovery. For example, rather than having to wait for an FO to arrive in their village to discuss a problem with the FFA activities or with food distribution, they will call the ActionAid office, or speak directly to the warehouse manager or drivers.

"(The project) is good since any time we want to talk to the Field Officer, we can call frequently. Before it was not all good since we would have to stay with our problems until the Field Officer came to the field." – Relief Committee member, Kinna

"Our work as RCs was difficult because we could not communicate (with FOs), not unless we met physically. Now, we can just make a phone call on the status of the work, and where to work at a given day. Communication has become simple." – RC member, Kinna

"(The project) also empowers the RCs. Now, I might have another activity. I'm not on site. But the RCs are empowered to do that work, without me being there." – ActionAid Field Officer

"We now have that link with the village and the towns. We didn't have this before. The Field Officers could not know everything. The Relief Committees give us information now. We can't just rely on the Field Officers because they are moving about, or are in Isiolo. The people we need to speak with are those who are in the same area, the ones who live there." – ActionAid staff, Isiolo

During one focus group discussion, RC members proudly recounted the time they called ActionAid staff in the Isiolo office to refute the claim that the community had not completed their FFA activities for the month and hence, would not receive food distributions. ActionAid staff from the office agreed to visit the community to see for themselves the progress of FFA activities, and food distributions were soon reinstated.

“Once, the food (distribution) was delayed for two months. First, we called and talked to the Project Coordinator, Mr. Koroboi. He sent the reply, saying that we had not finished the work norms. I replied back that we had finished the work. Mr Koroboi came and talked to us and went to the site. He saw the work and was satisfied we had finished it. Then the food was sent.” – RC member, Garba Tula

RCs are also using the mobile phones to spontaneously communicate with ActionAid field staff and the regional office in Isiolo town about a variety of issues not necessarily related to food distributions. The spontaneous messages range from reports of rainfall, flooding and the start of crop-planting to reports of disease among livestock or humans, like outbreaks of diarrhoea. They also include reports of cattle-rustling and the movement of stolen cattle. Many RCs also report by SMS on the price of food commodities in their villages.

“When we have conflict or any danger along the Isiolo-Garba Tula road, like when there are bandits, we call the ActionAid drivers and tell them not to take that road. We advise them to use Isiolo-Mauat road. This phone benefits us in this way.” – RC member, Garba Tula

However, ActionAid’s capacity to process and respond to information sent from communities is currently limited. Interviews reveal that ActionAid in Isiolo does not yet have a system in place to verify, analyse, and respond to the feedback received from communities.

Furthermore, when the information received does not directly concern ActionAid’s own project activities, there is no formal procedure for sharing the information with other stakeholders or for ensuring that community members receive a response to their questions, concerns, or requests for assistance.

“We don’t have any projects for health or for livestock health. So, when communities tell us there is an outbreak of disease, such as poultry disease, we do not deal with that. The community must have been frustrated because we did not take any action. Personally, I did report it to the government. But they did not take any action, either.”
– ActionAid Field Officer

In summary, the communications project is providing ActionAid with more timely and regular information from the communities it serves and this information has at times enabled the organization to better respond to the needs and priorities of the communities it works with. But the full potential of this information exchange has yet to be realized, due to the lack of a system for verifying, analysing and responding to the feedback received, as well as a systematic process for sharing relevant and important information with members of the DSG.

5.2.2 Coverage

5.2.2.1 To what extent has the communications project enhanced the organization’s ability to reach population groups in need?

To understand the impact of the communications project on ActionAid’s ability to reach population groups in need, it is important to remember that when the project was first developed, ActionAid provided food assistance to 45,000 people. That

number doubled to approximately 90,000 shortly after the communications project started.

While the distribution of mobile handsets, solar chargers, and the implementation of FrontlineSMS and Freedom Fone did not directly contribute to increasing ActionAid's ability to reach groups in need, these tools did support the organization's communication with the substantial increase in aid recipients.

"We target 90,000 people in all of Isiolo County. Isiolo is vast and there are major problems with the road network. Prior to infoasaid, we never had mass communication channels. We used to communicate only with Field Officers via VHF radios. In some areas, we send an SMS and when Field Officers find a network, they receive information. We never communicated with Relief Committees the way we do now." – ActionAid senior staff member, Isiolo office

Considering information as an aid deliverable on its own, the communications project was expected to support ActionAid's ability to reach population groups in need through the provision of weekly market information disseminated to the community at large, not only to ActionAid food aid recipients.

By posting the price bulletins in public places rather than relying solely on RCs to disseminate the information during meetings to aid recipients, and setting up Freedom Fone, the communications project was attempting to reach a greater number of people in need than previously targeted by ActionAid. However, as noted previously, the results from this intervention are unclear for the following two reasons:

- Freedom Fone was expected to provide humanitarian information and market price information for any member of the Isiolo community. However, due to technical, financial, and cultural constraints, this communication channel has not functioned well.
- The reach of communicating livestock prices to members of the community who are not recipients of ActionAid's food aid is not determined. Due to time and resource constraints, the infoasaid research team could not visit all of the FDPs to monitor the placement of bulletins, or survey community members to find out if they regularly saw the market price information on notice boards.

Future research should attempt to quantify how many people in Isiolo are able to access, and use, the weekly market price information disseminated by ActionAid.

5.2.3 Effectiveness

5.2.3.1 To what extent has the communications project influenced the achievement of the organization's programme objective?

WFP's PRRO operations aim to help households, primarily in arid and semi-arid lands, to cope with and recover from drought. The two main programme objectives are:

1. To provide relief to drought-affected communities

2. To develop skills and assets to strengthen resilience against future shocks.

OBJECTIVE 1: To provide relief to drought-affected communities

AAIK provides food assistance to approximately 90,000 people in Isiolo. One of the objectives of the communications project was to improve ActionAid's food aid assistance through enhanced communication with the communities they served.

More timely, frequent, and reliable communication between RCs and FOs to improve food distribution operations

RCs and FOs expected the communications project to support their work as informants and mobilizers of the community. During the baseline research in June 2011, RCs articulated their need for timely and regular information from ActionAid's FOs, as well as the ability to quickly communicate questions, concerns or complaints from community members to the organization. **Findings from the focus group discussions highlighted the importance of this two-way communication for RCs, who now feel better able to express and resolve their communities' needs.**

"It is good because any time we want to talk to the Field Officer, we can do it frequently and it is fine. Before, it was not all that good because we would stay with our problems until the Field Officer came to the field." – RC member, Kinna

"We get information faster and we then inform the members of the community. This woman lives at the corner village and she has the phone. When I get information from her directly, I inform the others (in the community). We go to the place where we do distribution." – RC member, Oldonyiro

The FOs appreciate the frequent exchange of information that now takes place between themselves and RCs. They spontaneously provided several examples of information from RCs which enabled ActionAid to quickly respond to problems.

"There was a time they called from an FDP near Samburu Park. It was raining, and the river was flooded and carried away most of the lodges in the area. So the RCs called me and told me people were displaced. I could then pass the information to the office and tell them one of my FDPs had problems." – ActionAid Field Officer

"A recent example is in Shambani. One of the RCs was shot in one of my FDPs. The RCs used the phones to call us and also tell us their houses were burned down and they were displaced. I had to find them and figure out a way to give them food. It is these phones that helped me the most." – ActionAid Field Officer

All of the FOs interviewed asserted that the improved flow of information had significantly improved food aid operations.

"(The communications project) has improved food distribution. The community has to tell us how many days they have worked for FFA activities. Initially, we had to travel there and then check the registrars to get information. Now, we simply get the information from them. If there is a food delay, we communicate with them via phone. Now, we just send text messages. It has been excellent." – ActionAid Field Officer

“Before, it was very tough because I had to hire a motorbike to communicate with 10 FDPs, which are far away. I had to find the RCs, who were often moving around, and I had to wait for them. Sometimes, we had to prepare the registers when the truck was already there, which was a big embarrassment. The truck’s there, we’re waiting to offload it but we can’t because the registers aren’t ready.” – ActionAid Field Officer

“This has really improved the relationship with the community. In the past, we used to argue. The community wanted to know why I had not told them about the food distribution dates, why I had not updated the register but now they have enough time to prepare. They organize the offloading. Within 30 minutes we are done. Not like before, when we had to ask neighbouring villages to help with the offloading. That mobilization could take three to four hours.” – ActionAid Field Officer

There is now a direct communication link between ActionAid staff in the Isiolo office and RCs for increased understanding of the communities’ needs and concerns

ActionAid staff in the Isiolo office expected the communications project would create a direct communication channel with RCs, enabling the organization to better understand the needs of the communities they served. Prior to the project’s launch, all information passed through the FOs and was principally focused on food distributions.

ActionAid staff in the Isiolo office remarked that the information received from RCs (and some community members) improved ActionAid’s operations, provided some valuable insights into the needs of the target communities, and also empowered the people they worked with.

“I would rate the ability of the community to speak with ActionAid as good. Before, it did not exist. They would only communicate with the Field Officers. The ActionAid Isiolo office did not exist for them. There was only one-way communication and it was only with FOs. Now, at least, they can tell us their grievances directly.” – ActionAid staff, Isiolo office

“The project is very useful, even to ActionAid. Most of the community talks to us and tell us about security problems. They will call us and tell us, ‘Don’t come to that side. It is not safe.’ We now have that link with the village and the towns. We didn’t have this before. The Field Officers could not know everything. The Relief Committees give us information now. We can’t rely only on the Field Officers as they are moving about, or are in Isiolo. The people we need to speak with are those who are in that area, the ones who live there.” – ActionAid staff, Isiolo office

“The community members are very comfortable speaking with the office. When we do offloading [food distribution) and we are short of a bag, they will call the office directly and ask, ‘Where is the bag of food?’ If it is still in the store, they will request that we deliver it. If it’s not in the store, the driver will be charged a fee.” ActionAid Field Officer

ActionAid staff affirmed that through the use of FrontlineForms, information gathering regarding FFA activities is now more timely and secure.

Three types of FrontlineForms are being used regularly by Field Officers to provide ActionAid with up-to-date information about food distributions and FFA activities.

Forms are completed and sent within a few minutes. This information is then centralized in ActionAid's FrontlineSMS hub. Previously, paper forms were sent via food distribution trucks and it was not unusual for these forms to be lost en route.

"Frontline SMS forms are easy to fill in. It takes me just four to five minutes to complete the information and send it to the office. You just gather the price information from markets and then send it via SMS. Once a week, I fill forms for market reports and one form once a month for FFA activities. Also, I fill out a distribution report once a month." – ActionAid Field Officer

"Filling in the forms does not take even 10 minutes. Before, it was tough. We did not have information about commodity or livestock prices. I would report to the office only after distribution, which took eight or 10 days. Now, the office gets those reports every day... Now, the information goes to the hub and it does not disappear. It is secure. Before, I could give the info on paper and that paper could disappear. Once I send the SMS, the information is there in the office. It has made my work very simply, very easy." – ActionAid Field Officer

"Through the hub, we simply wait for the month to end, and then, you find all of the data that you need right there. It generates all of the food requirements for that community. Before, we had to travel to the community to get this information." – ActionAid Field Officer

FO's also remarked that the communications project had increased their productivity. They noted that the mobile phones had reduced their travel time, allowed them to conduct several activities at once, and enabled them to better respond to the needs of the communities they work with.

"I am now a free man. I can trace my RCs and communicate freely. Now, I can do more work than before. I used to have to rush to the field. I can now do two or three things at the same time." - ActionAid Field Officer

"The RCs now are used to calling frequently. After distribution, they call me with their reports." – ActionAid Field Officer

In summary, through more frequent, timely and secure information exchange between ActionAid and crisis-affected communities, the communications project has improved food distribution operations, directly supporting the PRRO's objective of providing relief to drought-affected communities.

OBJECTIVE 2: To develop skills and assets to strengthen resilience against future shocks

In FFA activities, community members are provided with food in exchange for work on vital new infrastructure or for time spent learning new skills that will increase the food security of households or communities. FFA projects undertaken by community members include irrigation, terracing, and soil and water conservation.

One of the objectives of the communications project was to provide information as a form of aid.

The communications project has supported the overall PRRO objective of strengthening resilience through the dissemination of livestock and commodity pricing information. As noted earlier (please see section 5.2.1 Relevance), researchers found community members using the information to determine when and where to sell or buy livestock and/or commodities. This increased transparency in market prices may boost the household income of community members, enabling communities to build their resilience to future shocks.

5.2.4 Efficiency

5.2.4.1 To what extent has the communications project influenced the time- and cost-efficiency of the organization's programme?

One of the underlying assumptions of the communications project was that the introduction of mobile phones and chargers to RCs would reduce the amount of travel required by FOs to deliver routine information, saving time and money.

"Unfortunately, it has been exceedingly difficult to determine with quantitative data the cost-efficiency of the communications project. We never sat down and critically looked at the specific benefits we were receiving. If Field Officers are traveling less, we are saving on car hires and per diems. We need to structure this information so that we can follow the impact on our finances." – ActionAid staff, Isiolo Office

Anecdotal evidence suggests that FOs have reduced the number of trips they take to the field to inform community members of routine matters. Two FOs estimated that their monthly trips to the field had been reduced by 50% but this information varied considerably among FOs (even if travel to the FDPs was reduced slightly, one would expect a noticeable decline in transport costs for the ActionAid office, since the hiring of a motorbike costs approximately £10 per day and a four-wheel drive approximately £60 a day).

"The office used to incur a lot of expenses for motorbikes to drive out and speak to RCs. Now, I just call and speak to them. And if we have visitors and need to mobilize (the community), I can just call the RCs." – ActionAid Field Officer

The project also assumed there would be an increase in productivity for some ActionAid staff, noticeably for the FOs. This was confirmed throughout all the interviews with FOs who commented on their new ability to execute several projects at once through the use of the mobile phones.

In the future, data regarding the project's benefits and costs will need to be collected by ActionAid staff in Isiolo to begin building the required evidence to allow a decision on whether the project should be terminated, sustained, or expanded.

5.2.5 Impact

5.2.5.1 What are the wider effects of the communications project, intended and unintended, on the target community? What real difference has it made to the communities ActionAid works with?

Several ActionAid staff remarked on markedly improved relations between the organization, RCs and community members since the launch of the communications project. In several instances, the FOs described their relations

with RCs as “very strong” since the implementation of the communications project, explaining that the RCs and FOs now worked in greater harmony due to improved communication.

“Relations have definitely improved between ActionAid and the community. If they are not satisfied with what we are doing, they can now tell us.” – ActionAid staff, Isiolo office

“There is a big change (from before). Initially, not all of my sites had FFA work. Seven of my sites are general food distributions. FFA sites are where we meet regularly. But at GFD sites, we could not meet. Now, we are closer. Before, we were far. The RCs update me on road security. For example, there is a site that is 60km from here. They called me and told me, ‘The road is not OK, so find another road to come with the food.’ With the RCs now, the relationship is strong. They call me and give me information. The relationship is becoming very strong. We are together now.” – ActionAid Field Officer

A couple of FOs highlighted the critical role of the weekly market bulletins in building trust with community members, which has in turn facilitated planning sessions regarding the sale of FFA produce.

Because the communications project allowed all stakeholders to receive the same information at the same time, it created a sense of increased transparency. This has, for example, improved discussions with community members regarding what they want to do with the agricultural products they cultivate through ActionAid’s FFA programme.

“Having livestock and commodity prices improved my relation with the community. It has built trust with them. They trust me more than before because I receive information from the hub. The RCs receive the same information. I have to facilitate the sale of FFA cash produce. I can now use the information received about prices to do this. I sit down with the community, together with RCs, to come up with a strategy on whether to sell products because the price is high or to store them if the price is low. The RCs back me up with the same information and we can convince the community together. It has helped me in my job.” – ActionAid Field Officer

Focus group discussions with community members suggest that one of the most important and unintended effects of the communications project have been the psycho-social support provided by the mobile phones

The baseline study revealed that community members generally felt isolated and uninformed. The introduction of mobile phones and solar chargers appears to have alleviated some of this isolation. Community members described the importance of being able to contact family members, request assistance for a member of the community, inform the police of acts of banditry, or simply share information with other communities about important events in the area.

The mobile phones and solar chargers serve as a lifeline to the outside world, especially amid heightened insecurity. From late 2011 to the present, Isiolo has been plagued by banditry and violent clashes between rival groups. In October 2011, one of ActionAid’s staff in Isiolo was killed during an armed raid in his village. Following his death, ActionAid temporarily scaled down operations in Isiolo District and its environs. ActionAid staff from local communities were advised to remain at home, while non-local staff were evacuated to Nairobi.

“My children stay in Kipsing and one day I heard that there was an attack there. I was worried because I did not know if my children were safe. I went to one of the Relief Committee members who has the phone. I borrowed it and I was able to communicate with my children. I felt very good when I heard that they were fine.” – Community member, Oldonyiro

“This phone helps a lot. Even those who live in a place called Gubatu, at the far corner of Garba Tula, recently managed to tell us through this ActionAid phone about a little disagreement on grazing. They gave us information on the situation of that place, like maybe someone has been killed or bandits have taken someone’s cattle. It has helped us a lot, and not only here. Even when there were killings at a far place like Merti koom, it was through this work phone, not our personal phones that we got the information that a number of people had been killed. There were people from Garba Tula that were killed there, so people went from here to go and bury them there.”— Community member, Garba Tula

“We could say that communication is not only about the community and ActionAid. It is also about the outside world. In one of the places we visited, someone was talking about a snake bite (and using the phones to call for help). We are not only communicating about food distributions, food rations etc. It is about saving lives. There was also the attack of a lion and they called for help from other communities. They needed assistance. There was also the case of cattle bandits. They can call for help. (The communication) saves lives.” -ActionAid staff, Isiolo office

6. Conclusion

6.1 Achievements

- The implementation and on-going operation of the communications project has largely been successful, despite limited resources dedicated to the project. There are a few “champions”, enthusiastic backers of the communications project who have ensured its on-going operations.
- The handsets and FrontlineSMS software are functioning well. RCs and FOs regularly communicate with each other and with the hub in Isiolo.
- At the time of the learning review, 1500 SMS messages had been received by the ActionAid Data Officer in Isiolo from RCs, FOs, or community members (an average of 5 messages per day).
- RCs are also using the mobile phones, solar chargers and texting function to spontaneously communicate with ActionAid about a range of topics including rainfall, flooding, on set of crop planting, disease outbreaks, and security incidents. Some RCs also report by SMS on the price of food commodities in their villages.
- There has been a significant improvement in food distributions since RCs started receiving information about distribution schedules from the Isiolo office 48 hours in advance. This provides the necessary lead time for RCs to prepare and mobilize the community for the truck’s arrival.
- Comments from the RCs interviewed suggest an increased sense of empowerment regarding the food distributions now that they can communicate

with ActionAid directly. They provided several examples of calling the office in Isiolo, the warehouse manager, or the drivers, to ask questions, complain or provide important information regarding road travel.

- Community members use the weekly market price information to inform their decisions about what, where, and when to sell. In some cases, community members are engaging in arbitrage to boost their household income.
- FOs assert that the communications project has had a strong impact on their relations with the community, enabling them to do their work more effectively.
- FOs explained that data reporting is more timely and secure since the introduction of Frontline Forms.
- ActionAid staff in the Isiolo office believe one of the main benefits of the communications project has been the creation of a direct channel of communication between the organization and communities which did not exist previously.
- ActionAid staff value the information received by RCs as they feel better informed and able to respond to the needs of the communities.
- For community members, the mobile phones and solar chargers also provide a much-needed link to the outside world. Community members described contacting family members in distant communities to ensure they were well, reporting security incidents, and sharing a broad variety of other information.
- The pilot project is generating interest within ActionAid, prompting discussions about scaling up projects to better communicate with crisis-affected communities in other countries.

6.2 Challenges

- The function of the solar chargers is deteriorating. This is a critical problem in an area with very little access to electricity.
- Freedom Fone has experienced several technical problems. In addition, its use is hampered by important financial, cultural, and linguistic challenges.
- ActionAid is not yet using the market price bulletins as a vehicle to transmit important news and information and humanitarian key messages to the local population. This section of the bulletin is often left blank.
- ActionAid currently does not have a systematic way for analysing, sharing, and responding to the information received, especially when it does not concern ActionAid's activities.
- The communications project continues to exist as a pilot rather than being integrated into ActionAid's wider country programme. As such, it has not been attributed a budget and is not regularly monitored or evaluated.
- The sharing of important and relevant information from ActionAid to members of the District Steering Group is currently not taking place. This limits the project's impact on the overall humanitarian effort taking place in Isiolo.

- There sustainability of the project is in question as only person knows how to operate the Frontline SMS hub.

6.3 Questions which require further investigation

- Some RCs who received a mobile handset and solar charger are not communicating with the hub in Isiolo. What is the exact number of “silent” RCs? What are the reasons behind their lack of communication?
- Why are the solar chargers deteriorating? (Manufacturing fault? Maintenance issues?)
- What is the reach of the market price bulletins within the Isiolo population as a whole?
- What are the financial implications of the communications project on ActionAid’s operations in Isiolo?

7. Recommendations for ActionAid Kenya

1. Discuss the lessons learnt from the pilot communications project and decide which aspects to continue, change, expand, or close down.
2. Encourage ActionAid senior staff in Isiolo to take a more active role in the communications project. They can provide strategic direction to ensure that ActionAid is always communicating the most important and relevant information to the local population. Provide the data officer with key messages and important local news and information to transmit to the local population.
3. Develop an effective mechanism for responding to issues raised by the community members that do not directly concern the agency’s own programmes. E.g. reports of disease outbreaks, security incidents, cattle rustling etc.
4. Invite members of the District Steering Group to participate in an exchange of important information related to the humanitarian situation in Isiolo County by SMS message via the ActionAid FrontlineSMS hub.
5. Investigate the causes of why the solar chargers performed badly with the manufacturer. Are the problems due to maintenance issues or a faulty product? If the solution requires new solar chargers, ensure a budget line is developed for this.
6. Identify those RCs which are currently not using the mobile phones to communicate with the FrontlineSMS hub and conduct field trips to understand the obstacles they are facing (problems related to mobile phone coverage, the solar charger, a lack of credit etc?).
7. Conduct a survey to measure the reach of the market price bulletins in communities served by ActionAid.
8. Explore the possibility of providing mobile phones to RC members who do not currently have a phone.

9. Train at least two other individuals in the Isiolo office on FrontlineSMS and FrontlineForms to ensure sustainability of the project when/if the current Data Officer is no longer with the project.
10. Analyse financial data to understand the cost implications of the communications project on ActionAid's operations.
11. Articulate a monitoring and evaluation framework by developing both process indicators (to enable the monitoring of implementation) and result indicators (to enable a before and after comparison).
12. Capture learning to develop a strong evidence base for lobbying within ActionAid and with donors to prioritise and provide funding for communications projects with crisis-affected populations.