Hotline in a Box

Case studies

● **ABOUT THESE RESOURCES**

Case studies are great to have on hand while planning, implementing, and assessing your channel for communicating with communities. Print them out and keep them in your office to spur discussion. What stories would you tell about your own community communication channel learnings?

1. Sierra Leone 117
2. El Jaguar - UNHCR, Central Americas
3. UNHCR Call Centre, Jordan
4. Tawasul, Yemen
5. FRRM Inter-Agency Helpline Uganda, UNHCR

Case Study: Sierra Leone 117

This case from Sierra Leone's 117 Contact Centre, illustrates how its goals transitioned to provide new services based on the needs of its affected communities.

● **TRANSITION 1. MATERNAL HEALTH TO EBOLA CRISIS**

117 originated as a national hotline for maternal and child healthcare information, but was rapidly transitioned to support the Ebola epidemic in 2014 under the coordination of the national Emergency Operation centre (EOC). During the emergency, paper forms were replaced with several software solutions to handle surge, and staff was significantly scaled up.

● **TRANSITION 2. SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH BURIAL CERTIFICATES**

Once Ebola was contained, 117 was scaled down to support people in obtaining burial certificates, which allows for the immediate tracking of new cases as a passive surveillance mechanism.

● **TRANSITION 3. A MUDSLIDE DISASTER STRIKES**

When a mudslide struck Freetown in 2017, affected people started calling 117 for help and to report missing loved ones – it has become known as a trusted emergency hotline across the country.

Case Study: Sierra Leone 117

A toll-free, nationwide phone alert system was established for rapid notification and response during the 2014–2015 Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone. The system remained in place after the end of the epidemic under a policy of mandatory reporting and Ebola testing for all deaths, and, from June 2016, testing only in case of suspected Ebola. We describe the design, implementation and changes in the system; analyze calling trends during and after the Ebola epidemic; and discuss strengths and limitations of the system and its potential role in efforts to improve death reporting in Sierra Leone. Numbers of calls to report deaths of any cause (death alerts) and persons suspected of having Ebola (live alerts) were analyzed by province and district and compared with numbers of Ebola cases reported by the WHO.

Nearly 350000 complete, non-prank calls were made to 117 between September 2014 and December 2016. The maximum number of daily death and live alerts was 9344 (October 2014) and 3031 (December 2014), respectively. Call volumes decreased as Ebola incidences declined, and continued to decrease in the post-Ebola period. A national social mobilization strategy was especially targeted to influential religious leaders, traditional healers and women's groups. The existing infrastructure and experience with the system offer an opportunity to consider long-term use as a death reporting tool for civil registration and mortality surveillance, including rapid detection and control of public health threats. A routine social mobilization component should be considered to increase usage.

Key Takeaways

By evolving 117's goals and services, the hotline was able to cut down on infrastructure, personnel, and cost.

A hotline has the capacity to support several issues and communities provided sufficient political will, funding and continuous social mobilization and community engagement to increase usage.
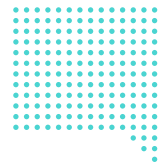
Case Study: El Jaguar - UNHCR, Central Americas

UNHCR in the Central Americas recently aimed to strengthen and expand existing information and communication efforts. As such, it developed a communicating with communities (CwC) strategy that prioritizes providing messages of orientation and support to migrants, applicants, and refugees, and space for them to communicate and provide feedback to UNHCR.

A very popular animal on the southern border, the protector of the fields and the guardian of the jungle, an animal that everyone knows and that has been venerated for thousands of years: The Jaguar.

● **DETERMINING THE PLATFORM**

The project began as part of UNHCR's Innovation Fellowship programme, in which human-centred design and frequent and comprehensive user testing play an important role. As such, UNHCR undertook an information and communication needs assessments with refugees, to determine their preferred channels for finding out about their rights to asylum, and for accessing support. Facebook was a high priority, with communities already relatively connected and using it to contact friends and loved ones. As many community members are in transit, traditional mobile platforms have been less utilized than where there are static population due to roaming costs.

● **BUILDING A HOTLINE**

UNHCR understands that a number of community members are not utilizing facebook, whether due to the prohibitive cost of a data package, or for reasons related to digital literacy. As such, a hotline has been linked up with the Jaguar platform to provide an alternative channel.

● **OUTREACH**

UNHCR is still in the process of reaching out to communities regarding the platform and its associated services. As of June 2018 it has 6000 followers on facebook, and a good response rate to direct messages on the platform, with questions being answered within a couple of hours of receipt on average. A number of videos are being produced to further support with community outreach, with aim to result in a steady increase of followers on the Facebook platform.

Case Study: El Jaguar - UNHCR, Central Americas

UNHCR in Central America (from Guatemala and Mexico) and its partners have set up a platform to provide information on asylum systems in the countries of origin, transit, and destination to people on the move, fleeing from insecurity and persecution. The platform consists of a Facebook page and hotline under the name "Confiar en el Jaguar" (in English 'Confide in the Jaguar').

UNHCR and partners specifically wanted to move away from humanitarian branding and logos as it was felt that something more compelling could be created that breaks with communities preconceptions of humanitarian support. El Jaguar was used as it is a symbol of trust and protection, concepts that are specifically important for migrants/refugees coming from Central America. UNHCR aimed for El Jaguar to become one of the main digital information networks for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in the region.

On the platform, UNHCR shared information and protection messages to people of concern, and answered directly to questions via Facebook's messenger function. If direct queries are posted in comments, users are encouraged to not share their information publicly but to utilise direct messaging for follow up with the office.

A toll-free phone number (+1 800-226-8769) was set up and was first socialized among people of concern at the beginning of 2016, unconnected with the Jaguar brand. By 2017 the number was more established, with an increase in callers, and was consistently referred to in all related communication materials with El Jaguar, essentially becaming part of the support function. It has subsequently been advertised heavily through the Facebook page Confía en El Jaguar.

The line has only a modest amount of calls compared to facebook interactions. On average El Jaguar hotline receives approximately 60 calls monthly, with the majority of callers asking about asylum procedures. The line is answered by the UNHCR Protection Unit and monitored by the Mass Information unit. Records of calls are captured using Kobotoolbox, installed on UNHCR's secure servers, and data is subsequently analysed for follow-up and analysis of trends.

 You can review the Kobo format in the following link: https://enketo.unhcr.org/x/#COzdcdZ7

Key Takeaways

UNHCR created a compelling brand – differing from humanitarian branding – to instill trust in the information being provided through the Facebook platform and associated hotline.

An assessment was undertaken with the population, establishing that Facebook was one of the preferred communication channels. In addition, a hotline was incorporated in Mexico to ensure inclusivity of population groups not using social media services.
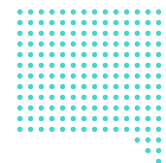
Case Study: UNHCR Call Centre, Jordan

Jordan has one of the largest refugee helplines in the world, which currently supports nearly 150,000 phone calls per month. Since its inception in 2008, staff at the helpline have responded to more than 1.7 million calls, giving support and advice on a range of issues to refugees in the Kingdom. The UNHCR Jordan telephone helpline is one approach UNHCR uses for two-way communication, providing information and feedback for more than 730,000 refugees living in Jordan.

SCALING THE HOTLINE

The helpline started with only two operators and utilised Nortel technology to deal with approximately 300 inbound calls per year. At the height of the Syrian refugee crisis, funding was provided by the Swedish government to enhance the system. As such, the call centre switched to Cisco technology, capable of handling a greater number of calls, and an additional 12 operators were hired to support increased demand.

BUILDING OUT INTERACTIVE VOICE RESPONSE

The UNHCR helpline was enhanced in late 2017 with Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology, in order to increase the number of calls answered, and direct callers more quickly to the right information. After providing their unique file number and a security code, Refugees can choose their topic of information such as cash assistance, health, registration, or other concerns. Most calls (90%) can be handled by helpline staff, but when an issue is raised that requires a referral and follow up, a 'referral ticket' is logged into UNHCR's case management system, and sent to the appropriate expert staff. For non-emergency questions, Refugees are informed that they will be contacted within a one working week. Emergency calls are responded to immediately.

Case Study: UNHCR Call Centre, Jordan

Following the huge influx of refugees entering Jordan from neighboring Syria in 2014, UNHCR upgraded what was initially a two person helpline system to respond to the increasing number of calls received. In 2017, UNHCR received on average 45,000 calls per month, and was able to answer around 60% of all calls; those with a wait of around four minutes were often abandoned by the caller, with the refugee then phoning again at a later time. The system underwent an additional upgrade in late 2017 with enhanced automated response features, aiming to reduce the number of abandoned and unanswered calls. With the new system, nearly 150,000 calls are answered in a given month, equivalent to 70% of all calls to the helpline.

The helpline is staffed by 14 UNHCR staff, and is open weekdays between 8am and 4pm. Calls to the helpline are free when using the Zain SIM card provided by UNHCR to refugees at no cost. As of February 2018, 143,000 refugee families have benefitted from the free SIM card.

The helpline uses ©CISCO Unified Contact Centre Enterprise technology, which includes a call recording system for training and oversight purposes, and allows for detailed monitoring and statistical reporting. The system has recently been upgraded from 30 lines to 60 lines thanks to the new Interactive Voice Response platform. At capacity, 14 staff can be speaking directly to refugees, while 46 lines can provide automated information.

Key Takeaways

By installing an Interactive Voice Response System, the UNHCR Call Centre in Jordan was able to cut down on waiting times, be more efficient, and reduce costs.

Over time UNHCR has aimed to optimise each component of the call-centres, making it as efficient as possible. This includes ensuring that agents are optimally busy, and that the hardware and software for managing cases is streamlined with the cell-centres operation.
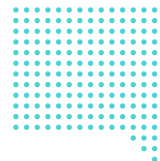
Case Study: Tawasul, Yemen

In late 2015, UNHCR in Yemen – in collaboration with local partner AMIDEAST – established Tawasul (which means 'dialogue' in Arabic). Within a few months, the call centre was receiving 1,091 calls per month, AMIDEAST had established a caller database, and staff were managing incoming questions on medical issues, food distributions and requests for individual protection. However, by late March 2016, the call centre had to suspend activities following an intervention from the authorities; and Tawasul was closed completely in June 2016, 6 months after it opened. The premature closure of the centre in Yemen means that this service is no longer available to communities, which has limited the scope of this research. Despite this, the following lessons have been drawn from Tawasul's short running period.

"As it opened, UNHCR's representative in Yemen – Johannes van der Klaauw – described the call centre as an 'avenue for complaints, criticism and feedback,' and a mechanism to strengthen accountability across the humanitarian community."

● **OUTREACH AND SOCIALISATION OF THE CALL CENTRE IS CRITICAL**

In the Yemen context, outreach for the call centre was far more effective than anticipated. Initially, the plan was to advertise Tawasul in a limited number of governorates (Sana'a and Aden), then expand nationally as the project grew. However, local partners and communities were very effective at 'spreading the word'. Printed cards with the toll-free numbers were shared widely, and partners and communities circulated the number through social media. The call centre opened with 100 calls from across the governorates in the first month, and peaked at 1,091 calls three months later. There were plans to run a media campaign to further advertise the services – but this was cancelled due to the suspension. The call centre had also planned to extend its outreach through an established youth network which would run consultations with community groups and members, then phone through the issues raised. Although the team in Yemen did not have the opportunity to test this initiative, they highlighted the importance of improving the inclusivity of Tawasul – by reducing the 'digital divide' and providing access for persons of concern without the means or resources to call Tawasul.

Case Study: Tawasul, Yemen

● **ADOPT TRUSTED COMMUNICATION CHANNELS FOR SENSITIVE TOPICS**

Tawasul demonstrated that in certain contexts a call centre is appropriate for sensitive issues. The type of calls received covered a range of protection issues – for example one journalist reported being threatened and was asking for support. The call centre also had dedicated toll-free lines – one for women and one for men – this helped create an environment conducive for sharing sensitive information. To build trust, it is critical that information isn't just shared; issues raised must be acted on. AMIDEAST and UNHCR mapped referral pathways so that information shared – including sensitive concerns – could be responded to and services provided when necessary.

● **NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE SENSITIVITY OF A CONFLICT CONTEXT**

The suspension and subsequent closure of the call centre highlights how sensitive operating in active conflict contexts is. Conflicts are about weapons, but also about narratives, information and dis-information. As such, activities involving the sharing of information – particularly visible ones such as a call centre – are often subject to censorship. It is not possible to assess how this closure could have been mitigated, as negotiations were held with the authorities prior to Tawasul's set-up and from March as soon as the initial concern was flagged. The learning from the Yemen experience highlights the importance of ongoing consultation and planning with key stakeholders – including those with the authorities. In addition, it is important that planning includes contingency for premature closure. This includes alternative channels and close-out activities, should services be terminated.

● **NOT LISTENING DISINCENTIVIZES COMMUNITIES TO ENGAGE**

Following closure of the call centre, AMIDEAST recorded a message for callers to explain that the service was suspended and information could not be provided at that time. The number of calls coming through very quickly dropped off as word spread that the call centre was closed. There were few repeat callers testing if the line was reopened. The rapid decrease in callers shows how quickly communities disengage from communication channels that are no longer open.

● **COORDINATION AND MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY ARE KEY**

To adequately respond to feedback and ensure adequate referrals, every stakeholder must have a clear understanding of the role they play in maintaining the mutual accountability of the mechanism. This was a challenge in Yemen. Some partners were less engaged than others, in some instances cooperation broke down and referral pathways were not maintained. The resources needed to coordinate information sharing, curate content, and ensure adequate services were substantial; the challenges faced were not fully addressed in the short timeframe of the centre's operaion, however. A key learning was the importance of integrating the call centre within the existing

Key Takeaways

Situations, technologies, communities and conflicts continue to evolve – as will the way we share information with communities. Partners in Yemen are continuing to explore ways to effectively engage communities post-Tawasul.
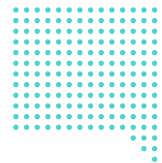
Case Study: FRRM Inter-Agency Helpline Uganda, UNHCR

In October 2018 UNHCR Uganda launched the Inter-Agency Feedback Referral and Resolution Mechanism (FRRM). Through the integration of previously siloed complaints and reporting mechanisms such as protection desks, suggestion boxes and community based structures, combined with the establishment of an interagency toll free helpline, this new tool seeks to enhance two-way communications between refugees and assistance organizations. It achieves this by creating a more accountable, better informed, and more responsive protection environment.

Design and development of the FRRM was led by an Inter-Agency steering committee established in May 2018 - consisting of the Ugandan Government, Care International, Oxfam, Save the Children, TPO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UN Women, and WFP - and chaired by UNHCR. This inter-agency approach, and the technologies deployed in the system, mean that the FRRM represents one of the most ambitious and comprehensive strategies for facilitating improved two-way communications and for tackling fraud and corruption used in humanitarian response.

The FRRM helpline, which is based in Kampala, has a team of 12 dedicated agents who speak a total of 16 different languages.

The platform's inbuilt referral network currently host an impressive 489 individual focal points within 38 partner organizations, working across 31 settlements. It allows refugee' queries to be sent to frontline responders at the click of a button.

The helpline is open 8 am – 5 pm Monday to Friday, and is operated by outsourced company TechnoBrain. The helpline has a total of 12 specially trained agents who speak a total of 16 languages. Upon calling, refugees are greeted with an audio recording requesting them to choose their language before being directed to the appropriate agent. The agent then proceeds to transcribe the case into English making it accessible to individual case workers in the field.

Case Study: FRRM Inter-Agency Helpline Uganda, UNHCR

Cases received through the helpline are categorized according to the nature and urgency of the call:

Categories 1-2 are handled directly by the helpline agents, guided by an extensive database of standardized FAQs.

Category 3 requests for assistance are automatically channeled through the mechanism's case management system to preassigned focal points within partner organizations for resolution.

Category 4 cases relate to alleging fraud and corruption, and are channeled directly to the IGO or anti-fraud focal points.

Category 5 cases are serious protection/ life threatening case, and are channeled directly to the head of UNHCR field offices in locations concerned.

All referrals are then tracked through the system's interactive data portal, which allows UNHCR and partners to track individual case status, referral response times, and quality of feedback given. The recent integration of natural language processing software (AI) provides further analysis of calls received.

Since piloting began in October 2018, the helpline has received (as of 13th November 2019) a total of 55,004 calls, and handled 20,2589 individual cases. While some 9,092 cases were resolved directly at the call centre level, a total of 11,275 were referred to FRRM focal points (partners and UNHCR) for resolution. A total of 14,762 individual queries have been resolved. With upscaling of sensitization activities ongoing, UNHCR Uganda hopes the helpline will eventually receive in excess of 10,000 calls per month.
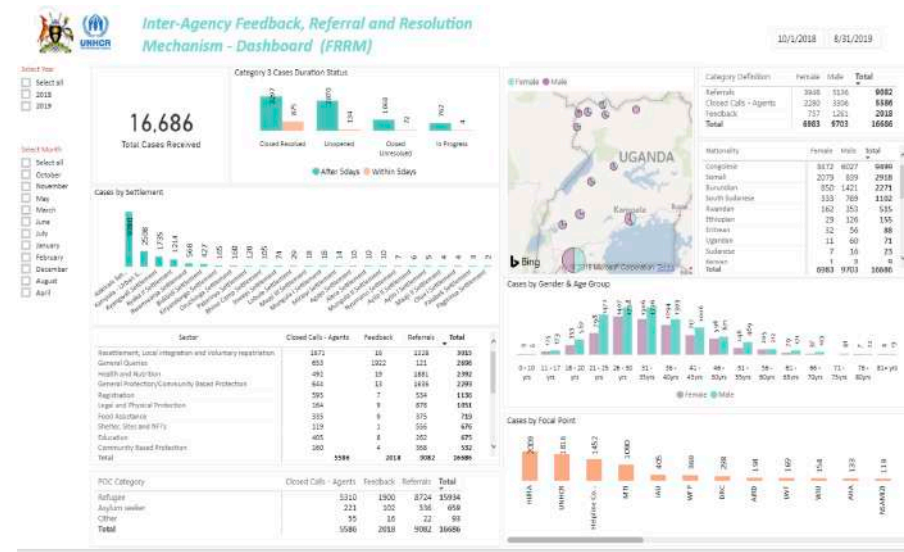
The FRRM public dashboard displays the types of calls received by location, sector, and category, and shows the full AGD breakdown.

Key Takeaways

A total of 55,000 calls were received during the first year of piloting.

9,092 issues were resolved at the helpline level, and 11,275 referrals were made to UNHCR and partners.

489 focal points within 39 organizations currently receive referrals through the platform.