Mobile and Humanitarian 101:
Key Themes from the GSMA Disaster Response and CDAC-Network Webinar

Introductory Remarks

Kyla Reid, Head of GSMA Disaster Response, introduced the webinar with a brief introduction from the mobile perspective. She made two key points:

- Mobile is increasingly becoming recognised as a critical tool in disaster preparedness and response. However, there are recurring challenges including coordination, a lack of mutual understanding between the different stakeholders groups, and a lack of sophisticated, predictable partnerships that need to be addressed to maximise the potential for mobile in this space.

- The GSMA and its members have seen a growing interest in mobile use by the humanitarian sector. There is the beginning of a move to recognise mobile communications as a basic humanitarian need and mobile infrastructure as a component of emergency infrastructure. This necessitates that mobile operators and partners in the humanitarian sector identify ways of working together more effectively, and recognise the capacity and role that each plays.

Rachel Houghton, Global Coordinator of the CDAC Network, spoke from the humanitarian perspective. She began by providing a brief overview of what communications with disaster affected communities entails, primarily for the benefit of colleagues from mobile operators who were on the call. She made the following points:

- Communications with affected communities is fundamental; survival in an emergency depends on timely access to information. In addition, affected communities have the right to voice their needs, ideas and feedback and be in active dialogue with aid providers. However, recognition of information as aid and the necessity for two-way communications between aid agencies and affected communities is still in nascent stages in the humanitarian sector.

- The CDAC Network was established in response to this communication 'gap'. It is a unique, cross-sector collaboration between humanitarian and media development organisations, and is increasingly engaging with technology and telecoms providers. For the Network, a focus on collaboration is key: technology and media, including mobile, offer efficient and effective means of enabling communication between crisis responders and those affected. There has been historically limited collaboration between humanitarian and telecoms operators and this exacerbates many of the challenges in emergency response.

- The main question is how to best leverage technology, including mobile, in the service of aid communities in crisis. There are many opportunities to integrate mobile more extensively, including:
  - Increasing recognition of the need to provide life-saving messages and communicate more effectively in humanitarian response.

- o The desire in humanitarian organisations to experiment with different technologies, including mobile, across the project cycle, and the increasing use of mobile to actually deliver services.
- o The fact that there is no cheaper, faster way to communicate than via SMS, and that it is a critical technology for hard to access areas.
- o There is a huge appetite within humanitarian organisations to engage with different technologies and learn new skills and a genuine appetite for collaboration with mobile operators.

Speaker Reflections

Nick Wasunna, Head of Operations at World Vision Kenya, was the first speaker. Overall he noted that mobile can be an effective medium to engage beneficiaries, and there is an opportunity to capitalise on this and other kinds of technology and infrastructure available to aid agencies to improve their capacity to respond, and to enhance their accountability. He then went on to make the following points:

- World Vision Kenya has rolled out a programme using Frontline SMS coupled with the distribution of 75 Nokia handsets and solar charges to relief committees in communities in order send out SMS feedback forms through the Kenyan Safaricom network.
- Challenges experienced included variable signal strength and resistance by the community to complete the SMS forms, as they indicated a preference to provide feedback directly by phone or to a person rather than through a mobile form.
- Humanitarian organisations have much to offer mobile operators, including information about mobile usage in remote and rural areas. Effective partnerships could result in the expansion of mobile products and services, such as mobile cash transfer systems. Where there is poor or no mobile coverage, multi-sector stakeholders need to come together to find a solution to provide mobile access, even if a business case is not obvious at the start. Governments also need to be involved.

Imogen Wall, Coordinator of Community Communications at UN OCHA, made the following points:

- There is a huge demand for communication, and experiences from disasters as distinct as the Haiti earthquake to Hurricane Sandy demonstrate that mobile connectivity is being seen as a humanitarian need in its own right. Recent research by the iHub in Nairobi, Kenya, found that the poorest of the poor in eastern Africa valued their mobile phones so much that they would go without food and other essentials just so that they could have enough credit to make calls.
- In the early hours and days of a response, people want mobile connectivity to talk to each other, not to humanitarian responders. This makes the need to get networks up and supporting mobile systems really critical.
- People also use social media via their phones, and this is as important as the ability to make calls.
- This reality requires a conceptual shift within the humanitarian system, and the need for more sophisticated partnerships with mobile operators to better meet needs of people on the ground.
- In many instances, mobile operators are already acting as humanitarian responders in various capacities and are engaged with the communities they serve. The spectrum of mobile solutions that could be integrated into the humanitarian sector – such as mobile money, mapping big data and displacement patters – and much of this innovation is coming from the mobile industry and the private sector.

- Within the humanitarian sector there is a need for increased capacity to engage and coordinate with the private sector to develop the level of partnerships required to meet the demand for information and services delivered through mobile that disaster-affected communities want.
- In order to facilitate this collaboration and coordination, the sectors needs to understand how each other work much better, including an understanding of the different strengths and weaknesses. Partnership needs to be built on mutual recognition of each other's value.

Oisin Walton, Programme Manager for the Instant Network Roll-out, Vodafone Foundation, was the final speaker during the webinar. He began by providing a brief history of The Vodafone Foundation's involvement in emergency response over the past 10 years, including through a partnership with Telecoms Sans Frontiers. The Foundation explored what services it could provide to humanitarian actors and so developed the Instant Network – a robust, lightweight and rapidly deployable mobile base station that is supported by an extensive volunteer training programme. As part of their preparedness work, Vodafone and TSF undertake joint trainings for mobile operators where they provide an introduction to humanitarian aid and principles, and also talk about technical needs within H organisations. They also run joint simulation exercises.

The Instant Network can be used in disaster scenarios where the core network has been affected and requires repairs, or where there is an absence of mobile coverage. An example of deployment of the Instant Network is in Kaikor, Kenya. This was at the request of the Kenya Red Cross to support their relief activities in this drought-prone area. The Instant Network connected with the Safaricom network to enable 260,000 calls for relief agencies and the community.

However, it is not just about providing mobile connectivity. There is a comprehensive package of services that mobile operators can develop and deliver in partnership with humanitarian actors. In order to capitalise on this, an increase in collaboration between mobile and humanitarian innovation centres is required. This needs to include discussions that identify and prioritise needs in the humanitarian sector in order to prevent reinventing the wheel; needs and capacities must be aligned and we need to ensure that solutions are demand driven and fit for purpose.