



A PEOPLE-CENTERED APPROACH TO HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE - CASE STUDY

Use of U-Report to strengthen humanitarian action

Malawi: getting to the hard-to-reach during flood emergency

Getting to the hard-to-reach during Flood Emergency

CONTEXT

In early March 2019, Malawi received a heavy downpour of rain which fell continuously for several days. The downpour was caused by Tropical Cyclone Idai, which hit Malawi and two other southern African countries – Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The rains were followed by devastating floods in 14 districts in Malawi's southern region, causing much damage to property as well as affecting people.

It was estimated that 975,000 people were affected, with 86,976 displaced, 60 killed and 672 injured. The majority were accommodated in temporary internally displaced people camps, mostly located in classrooms and school facilities, with limited access to safe water and sanitation facilities. This resulted in significant disruptions to learning and teaching activities at schools. The floods caused great damage to infrastructure, with the government estimating that 288,371 houses had been destroyed, and affected roads, bridges, power supply lines, irrigation infrastructure and crops. Power supply was interrupted for more than two days across the country.

ACTIONS TAKEN

During the flood emergency, U-Report was activated to collect real-time data aimed at assessing the needs of the affected populations and also to disseminate educational messages. The needs assessment data were shared with Malawi Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA), through the United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office, which was coordinating all the response activities by UN agencies.

RESULTS

During the flood emergency in Malawi, U-Report proved vital in informing the emergency response.

A week into the response, two polls directed at the U-Reporters from 14 flood-affected districts were conducted to assess the situation and the needs of affected populations. Through the polls over 60,000 U-Reporters were reached and 10,458 were identified to have been affected.



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As the prolonged rainfall was also weakening the supporting structures of Chagwa dam, one of the oldest dams in Zomba district, U-Report was used as an early warning system to help mitigate the potential disaster, by alerting people of unfolding developments and encourage communities to prepare evacuation routes.

Flood and cholera messages developed by UNICEF's Global Innovation Center and reviewed by the teams from Malawi country office and DoDMA were also sent to help people to stay safe and healthy before, during and after the floods.

With the use of U-Report in the emergency response, UNICEF, other UN agencies and the government were not only able to measure the magnitude of the impact of the rains and the floods but also to concentrate their response efforts on the needs of the affected population.

Malawi continues to struggle with response to disasters and U-Report has been a critical tool linking the affected populations and humanitarian aid organizations such as UNICEF, partners and, more importantly, the government. It will continue to be used in post-floods recovery activities to give back useful information to the government, UNICEF and other UN agencies for an effective response.

The Use of U-Report data by the Department of Disaster Management Affairs

To get feedback from affected populations on response efforts a referral number was shared with U-Reporters to allow them to contact DoDMA whenever they had questions, feedback or wanted to report on any issue. U-Reporters responded positively, by either calling or texting to ask for weather forecasts and get more information on what they were supposed to do. Through the feedback, DoDMA was able to identify the knowledge gap among the population regarding safety during natural disasters and other humanitarian crises. The information collected has helped the government in elaborating a Disaster Communication Management strategy that prioritizes awareness campaigns and the use of U-Report in information dissemination.

To respond effectively to the most urgent needs of affected populations, DoDMA generally relies on Desk Officers, also known as 'Assistance Disaster Risk Management Officers', to collect data that is used to assess the situation and needs of the people. As the Desk Officers could not reach some of the areas, the assessments were not always comprehensive. With U-Report such hiccups were minimized as information was received remotely, and DoDMA was able to implement an effective, comprehensive and inclusive response despite access issues.

Bottom-up approach proves effective: direct engagement with the communities gave UNICEF and its partners the leverage in obtaining crucial information on what needed to be prioritized in the emergency response. It was also observed that push messages on U-Report were the fastest and simplest communicative approach to disseminate life-saving information to the affected population.

LESSONS LEARNED

The greatest lesson learned from using U-Report in Malawi has been the understanding that coordination is key to ensuring that communities in humanitarian crisis situations are well linked with the response teams. This is evidenced by the successful coordination between the Government of Malawi and the UN to receive feedback from and disseminate life-saving information to affected populations.

- Adding DoDMA as a U-Partner enabled the government to strengthen its interaction with people during the flood and to shape the awareness campaign.
- U-Report can continue to be used to receive feedback on other disasters such as mild earthquakes, road accidents, lightning, and others.
- U-Report should be seen as a multifaceted tool that goes beyond opinion polling and other youth engagement activities, but is most valuable as a complementary tool to facilitate a more people-centered approach when it comes to emergency response.

- Both humanitarian organizations and affected populations should be made aware of U-Report and its capabilities to assist in emergencies.
- UNICEF staff deployed to the frontline of emergency response should be trained to use U-Report as a feedback tool for real-time data collection and timely response from the sectoral programmes.

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