Use of U-Report to strengthen humanitarian action

Zimbabwe: citizen engagement in Cyclone Idai response
Citizen engagement in Cyclone Idai response

CONTEXT
Following Cyclone Idai’s landfall in Zimbabwe, an estimated 270,000 people were left in dire need of critical, life-saving support. Flooding destroyed food reserves, along with communication infrastructure and the roads linking affected communities to the rest of the country. At the same time Zimbabwe was experiencing an economic crisis, which severely impacted access to basic needs: food, health care, education, as well as communication services. There was a need for an affordable communication and social monitoring tool to ensure every affected citizen received adequate support.

ACTIONS TAKEN
To reach affected communities, UNICEF Zimbabwe used U-Report to:
- Provide timely life-saving information
- Raise community awareness on sectoral programming and
- Engage with affected populations

A post-cholera campaign survey assessed community access to information, knowledge on where to receive the vaccine and about the second round of cholera vaccination. Of 6,708 people polled by U-Report there was a near 50 percent response rate.

UNICEF also polled access to information and reporting mechanisms on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA). A poll on WASH services was also administered and, based on communities’ feedback, the WASH response was scaled up and geared towards population needs.

RESULTS
UNICEF worked with government line ministries and the Civil Protection Unit to disseminate critical life-saving information on health, nutrition, WASH, child protection, HIV and education to address immediate needs of affected populations. U-Report was used to:
- assess affected populations challenges in accessing health service delivery.
- identify geographical areas and populations that were not reached by the response.

- engage with communities in two of the ten provinces in Zimbabwe – Manicaland Province and some parts of Masvingo Province.
- issue calls to action by broadcasting important activities such as cholera and measles vaccinations (in partnership with mobile network operators, that reached subscribers in affected regions).
- provide an alternative education and awareness-raising tool (using bots) for populations in inaccessible areas, where the road network was wiped out by the floods.

U-Report was used under the assumption that affected populations had access to phones and had network connectivity. Yet, it was understood that structural barriers, such as access to mobile phones, electric power, and network would limit access to U-Report in some areas, and that there would be a limited number of subscribers in affected areas.

Despite the challenges, over 31,000 people were reached in affected areas and more than 14,000 new U-Reporters joined in the worst-affected province, Manicaland. A rapid assessment was conducted in the two affected districts, Chimanimani and Chipinge, showing that text messaging was the second most preferred means of communication, after traditional media.

Engagement with communities through U-Report contributed to an increase in turnouts for vaccination campaigns. During the first round of cholera vaccinations, U-Report cholera messages provided key facts and information on how to prevent the spread of cholera, and responded to ‘frequently asked questions’. Information on how to join U-Report was also provided when disseminating information and communication materials on health, education, etc.
LESSONS LEARNED
U-Report was an effective and functional tool in linking affected populations to humanitarian aid organizations and engaging with them. U-Report can be used to re-assess needs and factor community feedback in the response and early recovery phase. It can produce essential information that can be used by UNICEF and shared with the government, partners, and other UN agencies for a more targeted and effective response.

Preparedness and needs assessment are the key pillars in emergencies. UNICEF can mainstream U-Report in the preparedness phase and ensure that resources are planned and pre-positioned for roll-out in affected communities. U-Report can also serve as a vital early warning mechanism, alerting subscribers on the ongoing situation and prompting communities to make informed decisions during an impending emergency.

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