

Leveraging Mobile to Empower Communities in Mali: Learning from Practice

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BACKGROUND

Since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, [Internews](#) has been present in major [humanitarian crises](#) around the world, establishing critical links between affected populations, local media, and humanitarian agencies to provide life-saving information and set up effective two-way communication platforms. In [Mali](#), starting in June 2011, Internews implemented a project designed to strengthen the media's role in informing and educating the public in preparation for the presidential and general elections that were meant to take place in April 2012. Internews' project was run in partnership with the [International Foundation for Electoral Systems \(IFES\)](#) and funded by the [US Agency for International Development \(USAID\)](#).

Activities consisted of training and mentoring journalists to enhance both their knowledge of the constitutional and political processes related to the election--and their capacity to communicate these concepts to the general public across the country. The main focus was to give community radio presenters the tools to provide interactive civic education and electoral information to listeners in local languages--in a country with some 200 community stations and high levels of illiteracy. Internews held training sessions in Bamako and in two regional hubs, Ségou and Mopti, in partnership with IFES and URTEL ([Union des Radiodiffusions et Télévisions Libres du Mali](#)), the leading umbrella organization for independent radios in the country.

Following a military coup in March 2012 which halted the electoral process (and the Internews project) a Tuareg rebellion began in Northern Mali, led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). The MNLA quickly took control of the north, declaring its independence as "Azawad".¹ Yet after this initial event, Islamist groups who had helped the MNLA defeat government forces turned on the Tuareg and took control of the North themselves. In January 2013, the French armed forces intervened, coordinating with Malian troops, and shortly after claimed to have retaken the last remaining Islamist stronghold of Kidal, which was also the last of three northern provincial capitals.²

¹ "Islamists declare full control of Mali's north". Reuters. 28 June 2012

² "French Troops Retake Kidal Airport, Move Into City". USA Today. 30 January 2013



THE PROJECT

As a result of these events, Internews adjusted its activities in the country in order to assess the impact of the conflict and humanitarian crisis on the Malian media landscape. This assessment built on a prior evaluation conducted by colleagues from [International Media Support \(IMS\)](#) in October and the subsequent [report](#) from that mission.

Within the new framework of the humanitarian crisis affecting the local population, Internews liaised with UN agencies and aid organizations to assess the situation on the ground and identify potential opportunities for collaboration to strengthen current humanitarian communication initiatives--specifically looking at two-way communication with affected populations, and strategies for setting up new communication channels with local media organizations and other relevant channels/platforms. Radio is massively the primary means of mass communication in the country, but with mobile penetration in Mali above 80% and web access at less than 5% (sources: [CIA World Factbook](#), [UN-ITU](#)), cell phones emerged as an ideal option for increasing the interactivity of radio programming and reaching affected communities at large scale and low cost.



Internews mentored and trained Radio Kledu's journalists in the principles of humanitarian information allowing them to have a better understanding of the current issues. (credit: Gérard Nzohabona)

The outcome of these new activities was a partnership with mobile solutions venture [SoukTel](#)--an organization which had previously worked in Mali to deliver public opinion polls via cell phone, together with international media outlets. From October 2013 to February 2014, SoukTel designed and deployed a mobile software platform to support Internews' program activities, with a focus on two key components: First, an interactive voice

response (IVR) and SMS Alert platform, which would enable Internews broadcast messaging to community members via text or audio. Second, a Mobile Survey and



Polling platform, allowing Internews and its partner Radio Kledu to create and send out opinion polls to community members on a large scale, across all mobile networks, via IVR or SMS. Users could then respond to questions by choosing touch-tone keypad menu options, or by texting back their answers one by one. Incoming results appeared in real time on a web interface, for quick analysis and follow up. Due to challenges described below, the system was rolled out in the final two months of the project.

SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES

Looking back at close to six months of project activities in a challenging environment, Internews and SoukTel encountered both successes and obstacles. Among the successes, the partners launched a first-ever mobile audience polling hotline with local partner Radio Kledu, enabling the network to get real-time feedback from its listeners. Following the service launch, Radio Kledu received wide range of SMS feedback responses on program topics, which ranged from food security to the effects of the civil unrest on daily life.

With citizens able to share their views and voice their opinions, Malian community members could contribute more actively to national discourse on key topics. At the same time, Radio Kledu was able to engage much more actively with its listener base: Rather than simply broadcasting content, the station could now carry out an interactive conversation with media audiences, following the launch of mobile feedback services.

The project also experienced several key challenges. One initial roadblock was mobile network connectivity: since 2013, subscribers to the Orange mobile network have been unable to reliably call or text numbers on Mali's other major carrier, [Malitel](#). As a result, the team's initial plan to set up one nation-wide IVR/SMS hotline for media audiences proved impossible. Instead, the team worked to set up two parallel sets of hotlines: One for Orange subscribers, and one for Malitel users.

In a country with low literacy and numeracy rates, introducing additional phone numbers into the project's outreach campaigns may have increased confusion, rather than boosting access--the intended goal. Meanwhile, Radio Kledu's limited resources meant that staff had little time to learn new technology, or upload audio clips to the platform for audience use. The team learned that creation, upload, and management of on-demand audio clips requires staff hours and funds which are often in short supply. Adding to these challenges was a tight project timeline: Funding ended in late February 2014--meaning that the delays which resulted from additional connectivity work left less time for training, launch, and service roll-out.








Despite these obstacles, the project played an important role in helping Malians engage with local media--albeit at a smaller scale than initially planned. Selected comments from the thousands of SMS sent in to Radio Kledu highlight the commitment of listeners to take part in a wider dialogue about civil society, food security, and humanitarian aid:

“I’m from Sikasso, and I’m a loyal Radio Kledu listener. About humanitarian aid--what’s needed most is to care for people, offer them support, and provide a way for them to find their families and return to a healthy state”.

“Effective humanitarian aid means health, food, shelter, and the conditions for people to live their life as intended”.

“For definitive peace in Mali, we need a real and sincere dialogue of reconciliation between all the different groups in the country, and real assistance to victims of the crisis so that sustainable peace can come”.

“For peace to reign in Mali, we must forgive everyone, and everyone must join together to build the country - From A., a teacher in Segou”.

	223 [REDACTED]	6 Feb 2014 09:38	Salut je m-appelle youssouf [REDACTED] Agent Communautaire. de GUEMOU(KAYES) pour mw pour lutte contre la famine(fain) au MALI il faut la solidarité en general.
	223 [REDACTED]	5 Feb 2014 22:44	POUR LUTTE CONTRE L-INSÉCURITÉ ALIMENTAIRE IL FAUT D-ABORD DEVELOPPER L-AGRECOLTURE SAVOIR MIEUX ITILISER LES PRODUITS DIMIE L-EXPORTATION DU RIZ CAMARA BOUBACAR KATI AGENT MERCI
	223 [REDACTED]	5 Feb 2014 20:54	JE ME NOMME SEYDOU [REDACTED] DEPUIS DJELIBABA DIASSA VOUS FETES UN BON TRAVAIL MAIS IL FAUT TOUJOUR PENSER A AIDER LES HOPITAUX C-EST MON IMPRESSION JE VOUS REMERCI POUR VOTRE COMPREHENSION.
	223 [REDACTED]	5 Feb 2014 18:48	Asalam walcum! On m-appelle Sanata [REDACTED] Elève de la terminale science économique(TS.ECO).J-habite à Sabalibougou. Je pense que pour lutter contre la famine dans notre pays(MALI) le gouvernement doit mener une politique d-interdire au grand commerce de ne pas exporter nos cultures vivrières tant que la population n'est pas satisfait et donne une condition meilleur aux agriculteurs.Merci pour cette émission qui nous permet de dire le mal que nous souffre.
	223 [REDACTED]	5 Feb 2014 18:21	Reponse à la question.Au Mali la lutte contre la faim était intégrée dans des combats plus généraux.C'est une mission humanitaire.Pour combattre la faim au mali il faut que gouvernement malien diminue les prix des aliments.Comme le riz,mil,sorgho,mil etc... Boubacar .Hamdalaye.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Looking ahead, SoukTel and Internews offer several ‘lessons learned’ to others who may want to launch similar services:

- Clear communication about human resource needs at local media outlets can help ensure that enough staff are available on the ground--and that they’re able to devote time to learning (and managing) mobile software components.
- The telecoms sector changes quickly: One month’s status quo may be the next month’s old news. Pricing evolves rapidly, and agreements between carriers don’t last long. Regularly checking and testing the latest state of SMS & audio connectivity helps ensure service continuity and leads to fewer surprises.
- In mobile outreach campaigns, targeted or focused audience questions generate higher response rates than general/open-ended questions: When local partners



changed question phrasing from “What do you think of the show?” to “What is your opinion of food insecurity in Mali, and what are ways we can address this issue?” incoming SMS responses jumped significantly in a single week.

- The greater the number of partners on a project, the more often all partners should communicate. Especially when stakeholders are in multiple countries, regular updates--either through teleconferences, online chats, or basic email summaries--can ensure that all parties are on the same page.
- Development work and technology do not always have the same requirements and the same timelines. It is fundamental to make sure that when organizations collaborate, all information about requirements, timelines and expectations is exchanged and clarified in advance.
- When it comes to the use of specific technologies in specific context, it does not matter how “easy” the technology is. User interfaces, technology capacity, familiarity with tools and systems have a huge impact on the use of tools. In this context training is never enough, and longer one-on-one mentoring is necessary to make sure that a tool will be used in the long term efficiently.
- A user centered design approach to ICT4D projects should always be used when possible, both in the design of the technology and in the design of the overall project. The involvement of the beneficiaries and users of the project into the design may cost more in terms of time and money in the beginning, but it becomes a long-term investment that is worth the effort and the cost.
- Every ICT tool needs to be seen as an integral part of the already existing Information Ecosystem. A tool does not lie in a vacuum; it has effects on--and is affected by--where it is implemented, how it is used, and who is using it. It’s also influenced by the infrastructure, the culture of users, and the entire project it is inserted into. A holistic approach to applications and uses of mobile technology helps in making projects sustainable, scalable and robust.

While the project itself drew to a close in the spring of 2014, the partner radio station benefitted from new tools for connecting with its audiences--leveraging the widespread, low-cost channels of mobile text and audio. Community members, in turn, gained a new voice in civic discourse--with the ability to share their views in real time, at scale, via basic mobile phone. Looking ahead, the challenges related to launching mobile media services in a transitional country like Mali remain clear--but so too does the potential for this technology to empower citizens at scale.

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