

Using Mobile Phones to Provide Critical Food Assistance

mVAM: Piloting Mobile Voice Technology for Household Food Security Data Collection
United Nations World Food Programme

“We were curious: if we used mobile technology, could we get information faster, cheaper, and in a lighter way. If you use SMS or voice calling, you don’t have 10 page questionnaires. You can throw out some simple questions, over time, and see the responses you get. There are many UN ‘no-go zones’. So there were instances where we flew in by helicopter and had two hours to figure out what is going on with 100,000 people.”

Arif Husain, chief economist at the WFP

In mid 2013, WFP with the help of HIF funding, began exploring the use of mobile technology to gather crucial information. Before, the organisation relied on face to face surveys and interviews to find out the most basic information, such as what food people had to eat and how much there was of it. The benefits of using mobile technology are enormous. Calling those stranded in violent areas is far less dangerous than sending employees in to collect information. WFP also estimates it could save up to 40% on the cost of data collection by using mobile technologies.

Monthly data collection began in the Democratic Republic of Congo in February 2014 and in Somalia in May the same year, using a combination of interviews and Integrated Voice Recognition (IVR) surveys to automate the data collection process. To do this, WFP identified private sector partners with both telecommunications and polling experience. The project has proved highly successful, demonstrating the potential of such technology to provide accurate survey data, while reducing time and cost. WFP, the world’s largest humanitarian organisation, is now working with private and public donors to embed the new approach across its operations, achieving scale and broad impact.



“This project has proved that *it* is possible. Phone surveys are quick, cheap and reliable. There has been a shift in mind sets. This is a way forward and right now we are working in 10 other countries and also seeing others using the same process thanks to what we proved in the pilot project in Somalia and DRC.”

Jean-Martin Bauer, WFP

Using Mobile Phones To Provide Critical Food Assistance

Project Title:

Piloting mobile voice technology for household food security data collection

Key Information:

Lead organisation: United Nations World Food Programme

Location: Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia – approaches developed with HIF now being rolled out in Iraq and were used in the Ebola crisis in West Africa in 2014

Grant awarded: 2013, Large Grant

Innovation phase: Implementation

Summary:

The mVAM project piloted food security data collection from households through short mobile phone surveys, using live telephone interviews and an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system. The pilot project monitored a panel of 600 households in Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia for a period of 12 months.

The short surveys asked questions about people's food security and coping strategies used. The objective was to learn about the suitability of voice calls for survey research in the humanitarian world, and to see if voice calls can make food security monitoring surveys more time and cost efficient. The high frequency data collected is used to track trends in vulnerability and support decision making processes.

Monthly data collection began in the Democratic Republic of Congo in February 2014 and in Somalia in May 2014.

The project proved that mVAM – 'mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping' leads to significant time and cost-efficiency of data collection.

Challenge Addressed:

High cost and cumbersome implementation of primary data collection from households for humanitarian needs assessments.

Innovation Factor:

mVAM provides for the use of mobile voice technology for the collection of household food security data. The mVAM approach allows for a more precise understanding of time and cost-efficiency of voice relative to existing face-to-face methods of collecting data. Data collected through voice feeds into established information systems by providing additional, real time data for humanitarian decision making.

Added Value:

The mVAM approach increases cost-effectiveness and timeliness of data collection for short periodic surveys, such as WFP's regular Food Security Monitoring Systems (FSMS) that track trends over time.

Are IVR surveys right for Somalia? Blog March 2015

As the mVAM pilot project enters its final quarter, the team focused on finalizing all planned activities, and documenting learning that will allow us to scale up with a strong evidence base. Highlights include some hands-on work with the team in Somalia, and the launch of a comprehensive review of our activities.

The Somalia IVR coming along

A key question we have is whether interactive voice response (IVR) surveys are user friendly enough to be used in Somalia with the vulnerable groups that WFP works with. We were able to get our first complete IVR surveys using a Somali language questionnaire. The team in Galkayo was trained on how to place the calls and are following a plan to scale up IVR calls. Meanwhile, we will continue collecting food security data through calls placed by our operators, a modality that has worked well to date.

Making the IVR operational: training underway

During the visit, key discussions took place regarding appropriate incentive rates.

In both DR Congo and Somalia, respondents receive a token of appreciation from WFP in order to promote participation in surveys. There seem to be three schools of thought in the team. Some believe the incentive should increase in Somalia. Others think that increasing call attempts and better sensitizing respondents should be sufficient to ensure good response to our surveys. Others still question the principle of providing an incentive to people who might already receive food assistance from WFP.



www.wfp.org

<http://resources.vam.wfp.org/mVAM>

June 2015