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An aerial image of the destroyed Wesley village, Northern Dominica. Photo: WFP / Angel Buitrago

Special Report: ETC Services for Communities (S4C)

Listening to the people of Dominica

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People from distant communities come everyday to Charles Douglas airport, North Dominica to access Internet connectivity provided by the ETC. Photo: WFP / Phyza Jameel

Dominica, one of the poorest island countries in the Caribbean region, was the first one to be hit by the category-five Hurricane Maria. This hurricane tore through the entire island, claiming the lives of 15 people, destroying many properties and infrastructure. It led to disruptions in clean water supply, electricity outages as well as completely cut-off communications, directly or indirectly affecting the country's entire population (about 73,000 people).

With the support of governments, United Nations (UN) agencies, and humanitarian partners World Food Programme (WFP), as lead agency of the Emergency Telecommunication Cluster (ETC), is leading the response efforts to restore telecommunication and connectivity in Dominica. The ETC team is providing telecommunications solutions to government, military and humanitarian organizations to carry out their relief response by providing Internet connectivity at key areas across the island. In addition, it is providing free of charge Internet connectivity to the affected communities, where there is neither mobile network coverage nor Internet connectivity.

CONNECTIVITY NEEDS ASESMENT

Rationale

In line with its ETC 2020 Strategy, the ETC carried out a community needs assessment in the North and the South of Dominica to understand and learn:

- How loss of connectivity affects people's lives;
- What were the Internet connectivity usage patterns before the hurricane;
- What kind of information people would like to access once connected to the Internet.

Methodology

The assessment was carried out in Marigot and Wesley in North Dominica and in Roseau, South of Dominica. The methods included: interviews with key stakeholders, and two focus group discussions: one with the head of each households and the other with men, women, boys, and girls. For all participants, the size of their households varied between four to eight members.

Findings

Loss of connectivity has affected the lives of communities in the South of Dominica more than those in the North, due to urban populations' (more prevalent in the South) dependency on mobile network connectivity. Since Northern Dominica is made up of small communities, communication relied on word of mouth, radio announcements and messages from the council members. Social media is the most popular medium among women and men alike to keep in contact with their families and friends. Messenger conversations have replaced word of mouth communication—it is mostly used by people to connect with their trusted friends and family to discuss present situation.

In the South of the country, in addition to social media, people have the access to information through radio and television, which, however, are not considered as reliable sources. Stephen, 46, a fisherman from Roseau, lost everything he had, due to his lack of trust in the evacuation notice: "I know they made an announcement on the radio that the communities near river catchment should evacuate, yet I didn't take it seriously. And I lost everything I had—all my properties and the house".

The hurricane had adversely affected the connectivity across Dominica. The two major mobile network operators— Digicel and Flow, had in total 15 towers, out of which only 5 survived the hurricane. This has left the island in almost complete connectivity loss. In Roseau area, Digicel retained its services, yet people had no means to charge their phones due to power cuts. There were only a handful of areas where people had access to electricity to charge their phones. During the last weeks, the situation has improved for Roseau, as electricity has been resumed in key areas.

In the North, there was a complete blackout of electricity and mobile network after the hurricane. In the fourth week after the Hurricane, Flow has resumed its network at certain places in the North.

What are ETC Services for Communities (S4C)?

As an authoritative voice on ICT in emergencies, the ETC plays a vital role in ensuring that technology projects for communities are responsible, address identified gaps, not duplicated, and well-communicated. Through its member and partnership network, the ETC ensures provision of information and communications technology solutions to enable communities to communicate in emergencies.

Access to connectivity is vital to ensure that affected populations can access information about assistance, contact their families and friends and make informed decisions about their own lives during and after a crisis. This means that communities have connectivity and platforms to inform themselves about aid and services available, and should be able to interact with relief workers before, during and after the aid is provided.

Access to information is a critical human need—as reliable and relevant information can help save, rebuild and rehabilitate lives. ETC S4C aims with help with information technology to empower communities to make informed decisions during and after a disaster.

Through provision of its S4C, the ETC can take a much more comprehensive and complete approach to the provision of aid, where technology is used as a two-way communication and where responders take into account various needs of the affected communities.

Use of connectivity

For most of the people in the North and the South of Dominica, WhatsApp conversations replaced phone calls between users. Both Digicel and Flow offered packages that included free basic services including WhatsApp calls and messages. However, phone calls were limited.

Communities in the North relied on phone calls more than WhatsApp calls, as the penetration of smart phones was lower than in the South. Another major use of connectivity was social media including Facebook. During post disaster phase, most people said to have used Internet connectivity to inform and inquire about the wellbeing of their loved ones.

Information needs

Due to a more severe connectivity blackout in the North compared to the South, there was a visible lack of information among communities in Marigot compared to Roseau. The biggest information need in Roseau was information regarding access to aid. For example, in Marigot and Wesley, most people did not know who to contact to locate tarpaulin distributions. Certain remote communities showed lack of trust in the existing information system on the distributions.

In the South, the biggest information need was to know the periodicity and entitlement of receiving aid such as food and shelter. In the North, the need of information was primarily regarding accessing aid distributions, and insurance claims for houses. In the South, people wanted to know more about livelihood programs.

The ETC team's initial response was to provide Internet connectivity at two main locations: governments' Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) building in Roseau and Charles-Douglas Airport in the North. In the EOC building, the connectivity provided by the ETC supported government and humanitarian workers who operated from the building. The connectivity was extended to the office of Prime Minister, crucial ministries, military coordination and CDEMA. The EOC building also served as a hub for all humanitarian organizations and sectors, who were able to provide critical support to government for aid and relief work.

In the North, Charles Douglas Airport became a major hub of connectivity which provided support to meteorological office, and more than 20 humanitarian organization offices there. Charles-Douglas Airport also provided free connectivity to passengers who were being evacuated—almost 300 a day. Later the network was extended to the affected populations, to allow them access Internet connection free of charge, which in turn enabled to send and receive life-saving information on distributions as well as arrange their evacuation and make informed decisions on their next steps.

Farmers, fishermen, and traders wanted to know if there were any compensation packages schemes to support them back into their businesses. While in the South people had some general idea about accessing aid workers and government, in North, there was a feeling of ambiguity and confusion on who to contact and who would be responsible for each assistance.

The families residing in shelters relied on camp managers for most of the information, yet camp managers themselves were not fully informed on the periodicity of the distribution. Furthermore, the residents of school shelters showed concern for not knowing many details on their movement to other shelters once schools resume.

Recommendations

Following the above-mentioned findings, these are the recommendation for Services for Communities:

1. Setting up temporary Internet connectivity hubs for communities until the Mobile Network Operator's (MNO) services are fully operational.
2. The ETC to continue providing connectivity support in the North and the South of Dominica to crucial government buildings.
3. Closely liaise with coordination bodies such as Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) to integrate beneficiary feedback and to inform and prioritize response efforts of key sectors such as food, shelter, and telecommunications.