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The UN Refugee Agency

THE ONE HOUSEHOLD, ONE PHONE PROJECT TO ENHANCE TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE

**Promising Practice
in Community Engagement
in Mali**

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Cover photo: UNHCR Representative handing out solar lamp and smartphone kits to the community in Mopti.

Photo credit: © UNHCR Mali/Chadi Ouanes

Title: The One Household, One Phone project to enhance two-way communication and accountability to affected people

Type of practice: Case study

Programme objective: To improve digital inclusion and two-way communication with forcibly displaced communities in the Mopti and Kayes regions of Mali through the provision of smartphones, Internet access and solar energy kits

Dates: August 2021 – December 2022

Population groups: Refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees

Partners: Comité International pour l'Aide d'Urgence et le Développmement (CIAUD) Canada, Stop Sahel (ONG), Moon (IT service provider), IT4Life (social enterprise) and the Malian telecommunications authority

⏩ Programme overview

Access to Internet connectivity and electronic devices can play a critical role in ensuring two-way communication with forcibly displaced persons, especially when humanitarian access to these populations is constrained due to geographical, environmental or security conditions. The One Household, One Phone Project, launched by UNHCR, targeted 400 households of refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees in the Mopti and Kayes regions of Mali to improve digital inclusion and information-sharing about their rights and the assistance available. Digital technologies also give these communities feedback and response mechanisms offering them the opportunity to make their voices heard and participate in adapting assistance programmes to meet their needs and preferences.

Through a participatory methodology,[1] UNHCR identified project community focal points and participants in consultation with members of the community and NGO partners, using an age, gender, and diversity (AGD) approach, as per the UNHCR AGD policy. Each of the 400 households participating in the project, of which 154 households are headed by women and 25 by persons with disabilities, received one kit containing: one smartphone; one SIM card;[2] one radio with a light; one solar panel; and three solar lamps, as well as technical training in how to use these devices. As a result of this project, members of these households are now able to exchange information with UNHCR and its partners, regarding assistance, their rights and available services, as well as to participate in surveys and feedback mechanisms to enhance the accountability of humanitarian actors. Participants also used the smartphones for income-generating activities, remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and for entertainment, while solar lamps helped

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[1] This methodology included community discussions, which took place at the various refugee and IDP sites covered by the project.
[2] Telephone credit was provided for a period of six months per SIM card. After that period, participating households were responsible for renewing the credit subscription, as that was one of the criteria for participation in the project.

children and young people to do schoolwork after dark and mitigated risks of gender-based violence by providing lighting in the community.

Following UNHCR's advocacy in the context of this project, the Malian government urged telephone companies to accept refugee identity cards and asylum-seeker certificates as valid identity documents for the acquisition of SIM cards, a measure that benefits all refugees and asylum-seekers in Mali to this day.

❯ Context

There are over 1.3 million forcibly displaced persons and returnees in Mali, including 391,961 IDPs, 785,725 IDP returnees, and 100,377 refugees and 279 asylum-seekers, mainly from Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania, as of December 31, 2023.[3] Since 2012, the country has been impacted by political, security and socioeconomic crises, including two government coups in 2020 and 2021. The lack of essential services, due to national capacities being overwhelmed, has led to hundreds of thousands of people in displaced and local communities being underserved and relying on humanitarian assistance.

Although refugees, IDPs and returnees often live in the same locations, humanitarian access to forcibly displaced persons is limited by security threats (robberies, kidnappings, explosive devices laid by militias and armed groups fighting the government, etc.) and other constraints (natural disasters, long distances, poor road conditions, etc.). This situation further deteriorated under the disruptive social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for populations exposed to heightened protection risks.

Given the challenges faced in accessing the displaced population, UNHCR placed particular emphasis on community-based protection to enhance community participation and two-way communication with displaced populations in Mali. In addition to the One Household, One Phone Project, UNHCR also launched other connectivity initiatives such as: a free telephone number known as the Blue Line[4], which refugees can use to receive information on their rights and available services, make requests for assistance and submit complaints or other feedback; the Connected Community Rooms[5] in the Kayes, Mopti, Gao and Menaka regions; and Connectivity 4 Communication (C4C),[6] a regional project to enhance communication, community engagement and consultations.[7]

As part of the C4C regional project, a regional assessment was conducted on information and communication needs for Mali, Ivory Coast and Niger; its findings were published in January 2021.[8] As part of the assessment for Mali, a total of 345 forcibly displaced individuals were interviewed in the Bamako, Kayes, Ménaka, Mopti and Timbuktu regions, in both urban and rural areas. The key findings

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[3] UNHCR, "Mali: Situation of Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and Returnees - As of 31 December 2023", 2024.
[4] UNHCR (Internal), "The Blue Line project brings support services closer to refugees in Mali", 7 September 2022; see also UNHCR and CwC, "Les bonnes pratiques des professionnels de la région".
[5] Ibid.
[6] UNHCR, SEKOU and IT4LIFE, "Digital access, communication needs and community practices. How digital inclusion can improve the protection of refugees, the internally displaced, and stateless people in West Africa", January 2021.
[7] UNHCR, "Annual results report", 2022.
[8] UNHCR, SEKOU and IT4LIFE, "Digital access, communication needs and Community Practices. How digital inclusion can improve the protection of refugees, the internally displaced, and stateless people in West Africa", January 2021.

of the study showed that, of the individuals surveyed, 52 per cent did not have access to electricity and 79 per cent did not use the Internet, highlighting the lack of access to mobile phones, electricity, network coverage and digital skills. Of the three countries covered in the project, Mali had the lowest level of literacy: most of the respondents had never attended school and only spoke some of the official local languages. In its conclusions, the study identified the need to make data and Internet-enabled devices more affordable and improve the quality of Internet connections for the population at large. It also revealed a significant lack of information on key issues such as rights and services and how to contact humanitarian actors. This research further recommended that more be invested in digital education and skills, especially for women and communities in rural areas.[9]

It is noteworthy that the One Household, One Phone initiative was the result of consultations with the community; indeed it was proposed by the communities themselves to address the shortcomings of the telephone assistance services that were set up during the COVID-19 pandemic, which excluded those members of the community who did not have electricity and/or telephones, as well as those in remote locations.

In particular, the project aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- To enhance two-way communication with communities.
- To ensure inclusive participation in telephone surveys and evaluations developed by UNHCR for gathering forcibly displaced people's perspectives on needs, risks and accessibility to accountability mechanisms, inter alia.
- To design and/or translate audiovisual materials with key messages relating to the protection needs of the population.
- To strengthen digital, energy and economic inclusion in reception areas.

One of the participants in the One household, One phone project receives his set of lamps, which helped to light the houses after dawn. © IT4Life/Morgan

[9] Ibid, pp. 63–67.

◗ Resources and partnerships

UNHCR played a central role in the creation of the One Household, One Phone Project, which came out of community consultations, and in sharing information to ensure that the project was accessible to all community members. UNHCR also engaged in:

- ◗ identifying target households;
- ◗ selecting service providers;
- ◗ facilitating the digital inclusion survey;[10]
- ◗ providing IT support; and
- ◗ coordinating partner activity, project reporting and follow-up.

Furthermore, UNHCR supported the training of trainers in digital inclusion for community focal points and partners visiting the communities, to teach target households how to use the smartphones.

This project was also made possible thanks to the engagement of private sector service providers working in innovative sectors such as solar energy and information technology. Two organizations worked closely with UNHCR on different aspects of the project and in close contact with the beneficiaries. The International Committee for Emergency Aid and Development Canada (Comité International pour l'Aide d'Urgence et le Développement – CIAUD, Canada), a non-governmental organization (NGO) working on assistance and development issues in the Mopti region, and Stop Sahel, an NGO working on environmental issues in the Kayes region, both participated in the selection of beneficiaries, in consultation with members of the community, and in the distribution of equipment and the provision of training sessions on how to use it and how to monitor the Internet connection and ensure that participants are informed of any equipment malfunction in a timely manner.

Moon, a private telephone service provider, supplied the equipment for the project (telephone kits and solar panels) and services to ensure the

proper maintenance and functioning of the devices. The organization IT4 Life, a social enterprise focused on digital services and a partner of the Regional Bureau for West and Central Africa (WCA), provided trainings on digital literacy; supported the development of digital content, and supported with the regional survey on digital inclusion. The project also had the support of the Malian telecommunications authority, which facilitated contact with the Internet service provider and recognition of the identity documents of refugees and asylum-seekers by private companies.

The overall budget of the project was $195,962, which included 400 smartphones, 400 solar energy kits (including solar panels, batteries, LED lamps and USB charging ports), technical services, training to set up the kits and distribution to the selected households.

A participant in the project receives his solar lamps and smartphone from a UNHCR staff member. © CIAUD Canada/Belco Yalcouye

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[10] See footnote 3.

Process and activities

1 **PROJECT ORIENTATION WITH THE COMMUNITY AND IDENTIFICATION OF PARTICIPANTS**

This initiative was launched as a pilot project with a target of 400 households in 2021. The project identified 300 households in the Mopti region and 100 households in the Kayes region. Project participants were identified through a participatory process involving community members.[11]

This took place in close consultation with members of the community through focus group discussions and information sessions organized by UNHCR and its partners CIAUD Canada and Stop Sahel, with the support of community representatives of women, youth and older persons to ensure inclusion across AGD groups.[12] The purpose of these consultations was to present the initiative to the communities and gather their perspectives on how to select and distribute equipment to a limited number of households while ensuring that the project benefited the wider community. These participatory sessions in turn contributed to a greater sense of empowerment and ownership of the initiative in the community and increased willingness to take part in it.

As result of these community consultations, the following eligibility criteria were adopted:[13]

- **Community engagement:** at least one member of the family playing an active role in the community, as a volunteer or as part of a community committee.
- **Economic activity:**[14] households in which at least one member is engaged in an income-generating activity and which are not fully dependent on humanitarian assistance. This ensures that participants are able to top up their telephone credit after implementation of the project, thus ensuring sustainability.
- **Protection, age, gender and diversity:** these aspects were considered in the selection process, including households with six or more family members, households with at least three young people and adolescents aged 18 to 24, and individuals with medical conditions or disabilities.

2 **SELECTION OF COMMUNITY FOCAL POINTS**

UNHCR and its partner organizations organized information sessions in the selected communities to identify members of the community to serve as project focal points. These focal points were expected to take part in trainer training (described below under Activity 3) to train community peers in digital literacy; they were also given the responsibility to share information about the project with other members of the community and make the telephones available to other community members in the event of an emergency or urgent need. The selection criteria for focal points included:

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[11] UNHCR then checked the proposed participant households using its data management system (ProGres) in the case of refugees and data from the National Directorate for Social Development on IDPs registered with government.

[12] The participation of persons with disabilities was mainstreamed through their inclusion among the focus group members selected for each of the age- and gender-based groups.

[13] Information verified on ProGres for refugees and the government registration system for IDPs.

[14] This criterion was established to ensure that the households selected to receive the phones and other resources would be able to maintain them and make them available to the rest of the community, including those households that might not be involved in income-generating activities. It is important to note that this project is part of a universe of initiatives aimed at empowering households, including people with special needs.

- Community members who are trusted in the communities for their knowledge of the local context and active participation in community affairs. The selection process targeted participants who were members of the selected households receiving equipment under the project, as well as community members who possessed smartphones prior to the start of the project.
- Proficiency in French (in addition to the language spoken in their community).
- Knowledge of how to use a smartphone.

③ DIGITAL LITERACY WORKSHOPS

UNHCR and IT4Life organized an initial training of trainers in digital literacy and the handling of the solar panels for community focal points and partner organizations CIAUD Canada and Stop Sahel. A total of 56 community focal points were trained to serve as trainers and coaches, including 15 women. In Mopti, there were 26 participants in total, including 6 women (3 IDPs and 3 host community members). In Koro, the focal points were 15 refugees from Burkina Faso, 11 men and 4 women; in Kayes, 15 Mauritanian refugees participated, 5 of whom were women.

A second training session was organized directly by the two NGO partners CIAUD Canada and Stop Sahel, together with the community focal points, to train all project beneficiaries. Given the considerable number of households involved (400), the participants were divided into smaller groups. The training sessions were facilitated in the most common local languages spoken by refugee communities in Mopti and Kayes.

④ DISTRIBUTION OF EQUIPMENT, INSTALLATION OF SOLAR PANELS AND LAMPS, AWARENESS-RAISING

After receiving training on solar panels conducted by IT4Life and Moon, partner organizations CIAUD Canada and Stop Sahel distributed the smartphones, SIM cards and solar kits and provided technical support for installation of the solar panels and lamps in each household. The distribution of mobile phones and solar kits addressed security issues at three levels:

- Security during transportation of the items to the distribution sites.
- Security during distribution.
- Security on site once the equipment had been installed in the households.

In order to mitigate potential risks of assault and theft, the distribution partners avoided transporting large quantities of items at the same time and used public transport for reasons of discretion. For example, the 150 telephones and solar kits for the Koro area were transported by a commercial bus company in batches of 50 on three different days.

In addition, the kits were delivered to small groups of around 15 people on average, according to a distribution schedule that took two aspects into account: beneficiaries' availability and diversification of delivery points according to their proximity to the beneficiaries' places of residence. Finally, the households that received the telephones and solar energy kits were responsible for ensuring the safety of the equipment at their place of residence and elsewhere. These various measures, taken mainly in areas where security is fragile, have proved effective in implementing the project.

Additionally, awareness was raised in beneficiary households of the importance of their role as key community actors. The aim was to prevent individuals from keeping the provided resources to themselves for their own personal use and to encourage them to share resources and information and, on occasion, make their telephones available to others according to the community's needs.

5 MONITORING AND FOLLOW-UP

UNHCR Mali conducted field missions and community meetings to monitor this project, together with NGO partners on the ground.[15] Community members consulted included participants receiving equipment under the project as well as other members of the community. Additional communication was established through the Blue Line initiative, which provided individuals with an opportunity to provide feedback about the project. In addition, a WhatsApp group was created and jointly managed by UNHCR ICT and community-based protection units to facilitate the sharing of information between project focal points in the communities and UNHCR and NGO partner staff. Participants who provided feedback indicated the significant impact of the project in improving communication for community members and provided very positive feedback on the quality of the equipment and the Internet service.

A group of the project's selected participants, after completing a series of trainings designed to teach them how to use the resources provided in the kits. © IT4Life/Morgan

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[15] The Regional Bureau for West and Central Africa also guided the implementation and monitoring process, remotely.

Achievements, results and impact

This project provided 400 households in the Mopti and Kayes regions of Mali, including 132 households headed by refugee and IDP women, with the tools and technologies they needed to participate in a digital society. These households are now able to communicate and receive information on a variety of topics that can make a difference to the quality of their day-to-day lives, including access to assistance, information on their rights and available services, information on health issues and news about their community and places of origin.

Communities impacted by the project can also voluntarily[16] participate in remote surveys (via SMS and telephone) developed by UNHCR in collaboration with IT4life and other information technology service providers, to share information about their situation and provide feedback on services offered by humanitarian actors. Several periodic consultations have been carried out as part of the monitoring of this project. Beneficiaries of the phones and solar kits at the various sites visited in all of the regions covered by the project unanimously consider the phones to be of good quality, strong and durable, with good battery life and remarkably useful in everyday life. For example, at the Horoguende site in the Mopti region in February 2023, a number of beneficiaries, including representatives of women single-parent households, said that the phones had enabled them to contact family members they had lost track of and to access information about the various services they needed.

Some community members also participated in awareness-raising sessions on accountability mechanisms put in place by UNHCR in collaboration with protection partners, governmental agencies (notably the National Directorate for Social Development's) and other humanitarian actors, in particular the Blue Line initiative, thus improving accountability to affected people.

Access to digital devices and Internet connections has also contributed to other positive protection outcomes for these communities, including remote monitoring on environmental issues and early warnings of population movements. In Melga, in the Kayes region, refugees used their smartphones to take pictures of a market gardening area, which they then shared with humanitarian actors to highlight the difficulties caused by the lack of water during the drought. This enabled the partner in charge of the project to organize urgent consultations with the market gardeners, enabling them to take initiatives to save the crops. In Melga and Dignigole, the smartphones provided through the project enabled community members to reach UNHCR and its partners and provide feedback about protection incidents and needs in their communities after attacks by armed groups. The smartphones also enabled community monitors to report population movements and the number of new arrivals to relevant authorities and humanitarian actors.

The project also improved access to electricity for forcibly displaced persons in Mali by providing solar power. This contributed to the enjoyment of rights and had a direct impact in mitigating GBV risks: lighting was provided to homes and shopfronts, enabling individuals, especially girls and women, to move around in the community in greater safety at night could continue with work and other tasks at night; for example, solar lamps helped children and young people to study after dark.[17]

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[16] Refugees and IDPs willing to share their telephone contact information to strengthen communication with UNHCR and protection partners sign refugee consent disclosure forms administered by UNHCR and partners.
[17] This issue was identified as one of the factors limiting students' ability to do their homework in the evening.

The project also supported the economic inclusion of refugees through the effective use of smartphones and the Internet in income-generating activities. In both Mopti and Kayes, farmers and herders share pictures of their products on social media to find buyers. In addition, the project gave members of the community access to new forms of entertainment. For example, young people in Mopti and Koro are now more present on social media and can stay in contact with friends and family more easily and watch football matches or take up hobbies.[18]

⬡〉 **Lessons**

✓ ENABLING FACTORS

- ⚲ Levels of interest and participation in the community were very high, as members of the community identified access to the internet and digital devices as a priority issue, given the serious need to enhance communication between communities and humanitarian actors.

- ⚲ Twenty-five potential partners were identified at regional level, most of them from the private and technology sectors, with whom UNHCR has not previously worked. These new partners helped to bring a new perspective to the project and, with adaptability, creativity,

listening and follow-ups, better results were achieved together.

- ⚲ Most of the members of the community selected to participate in this project have a source of income enabling them to top up their telephone credit and take full advantage of the devices and technology provided under this initiative.

- ⚲ Selected communities participating in the project have telephone network coverage and mobile connections, an essential component given the nature of the initiative.

🚫 ADVERSE FACTORS AND CONSTRAINTS

- Serious security risks (e.g. robberies and attacks by armed groups) in the regions in which the project was piloted led to delays in implementation due to the logistical challenges of delivering the smartphones to the communities. Despite such risks, transportation was arranged via local partners and distribution was eventually completed, although outside the original time frame.

- National regulations requiring identity documents to be provided in order to acquire a SIM card made it difficult for refugees and asylum-seekers to have access to this service and delayed project implementation. Thanks to UNHCR advocacy with the Malian telecommunications authority the Malian government issued official communications to all telephone companies urging them to

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[18] This promotes their right to recreation under Article 31 of the Convention of the Rights of the child.

accept refugee identity cards and asylum-seeker certificates. As a result, all refugees and asylum-seekers in Mali are now able to register for this service.

- Language barriers were also a constraint as the training for community focal points and partners was conducted only in French by IT4Life. However, UNHCR and other partners provided support to ensure that participants also received information in local languages if necessary. The second training session, which was for community members, was directly organized in local languages, with the support of the community focal points. Digital literacy training for people with sensory impairments is planned for the next stages of the project.

A group of community members after receiving their One Household, One Phone kits of lamps, solar panels, radios and smartphones. © CIAUD Canada/Kindo

Tips for replication and scaling up

- ☑ The incorporation of age, gender and diversity considerations into the eligibility criteria for participation in the project, as well as clear and timely communication of these criteria to partners and members of the community, was a key factor in ensuring adequate inclusion of youth, women and people with disabilities or medical conditions.

- ☑ Awareness-raising efforts addressing households selected for the project play an important role in ensuring that individuals understand the importance of acting as a resource for their community; of not keeping project devices to themselves for their own personal use, but rather sharing resources, information and at times the phones themselves, according to need.

- ☑ The initial study on digital access and communication needs was instrumental in bringing understanding of the context and in gathering evidence to guide the design of the project.

- ☑ Digital literacy training for community focal

points so that they can serve as trainers promotes empowerment of the community and allows for close follow-up with participants throughout implementation of the project.

- ☑ Making arrangements to deliver the training of trainers in local languages can enhance the leadership skills and participation of women and other diversity groups (e.g. youth, persons with disabilities) who cannot act as community focal points due to lack of proficiency in French. Adapting the training material to cater for hearing and visual impairments is also an important step to take in this drive for inclusion.

- ☑ Solar energy and lighting kits offer very significant protection benefits, especially in terms of preventing GBV risks and creating favourable conditions for the education of children.

⫸ Next steps

UNHCR will continue working with members of communities participating in the One Household, One Phone project to provide additional training to enhance their digital skills further. The Mali operation will provide support for the design and dissemination of content in different formats and for the translation of digital content into local languages. In addition, participants will be encouraged to continue sharing information about the project with other members of the community and to make the phones provided under the project available to other community members in the event of emergencies or urgent need. UNHCR Mali will also set up a communication mechanism to ensure that contact with beneficiaries is maintained and that they receive regular updates on the security situation in their areas. Based on the positive outcomes of the pilot phase, the project is expected to continue expanding to reach new households and villages not yet covered, including in the Menaka, Gao and Timbuktu regions.

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