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Mobile technology offers 'last mile' aid solution

By Omar El Akkad
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World Vision is betting its Canadian-made technology will one day become the standard for aid delivery throughout the world

As far as mobile devices go, this one is clunky, ugly-looking and shaped a little like a brick. On the other hand, it can also save lives.

Quietly, World Vision Canada [<http://www.worldvision.ca/pages/welcome.aspx>] has taken the first early steps toward revolutionizing the way non-governmental organizations distribute aid to the world's neediest. About four years ago, staff at World Vision began brainstorming solutions to one of the biggest hurdles in aid distribution: getting food and supplies through the so-called "last mile," where an aid worker physically hands over the aid to the right recipient.

For years, the last mile has been fraught with difficulties - everything from poor record-keeping to problems with identification to inefficiency. To get around those hurdles, World Vision decided to build a mobile device that would essentially digitize much of the information that aid workers were collecting on the front lines, such as names, addresses, medical issues and amount of aid to be distributed. Instead of carrying reams of paper, staff would now carry a single gadget, about the same size as a mid-1990s cell phone.

Four years later, World Vision is betting the technology will one day become the standard for aid delivery throughout the world.

The program is called Last Mile Mobile Solutions [<http://www.worldvision.ca/programs-and-projects/lmms/pages/last-mile-mobile-solutions.aspx>]. The brainchild of World Vision Canada, LMMS was developed in conjunction with FieldWorker Mobile Technology Solutions [<http://www.fieldworker.com>], a Canadian IT firm. The program consists primarily of a touchscreen tablet that field workers carry with them. That tablet becomes the main collection point for information about aid recipients.

Currently, aid delivery is for the most part a paper-and-pencil business. Recipients line up, often for hours, to receive food and supplies, and that transfer is documented by hand. The system isn't only inefficient, its disadvantages often have a ripple effect. For example, keeping people waiting in line for hours on end in inhospitable conditions can increase the probability of violence breaking out.

But starting in 2008, World Vision began piloting the LMMS program in Kenya and Lesotho. Instead of filling out paperwork, recipients were given ID cards. With a simple swipe, aid workers could quickly determine who the person was, what medical conditions they may have and what ration of supplies they were to receive. Data about the aid delivery was stored on a local laptop, which served as a sort of information hub.

Immediately, the benefits were noticeable. Cases of fraud were easier to spot. Because recipients showed an ID card instead of taking time to fill out forms or give fingerprints, lineups moved considerably faster. And

because there's little information printed on the actual card beyond a picture and a bar code, a lost card didn't give away too much information about its original owner.

For World Vision, the advantages were also clear. Progress reports that used to take massive amounts of manual labour to complete now took much less time, in large part because the data was already digitized.

In hindsight, it seems obvious that such a solution would make aid distribution much more efficient. But as Otto Farkas, World Vision's director of resource development and collaborative innovation points out, NGOs rarely have the resources to build a long-term technical solution, given that so much of their focus is expected to be on immediate aid delivery.

But with LMMS now up and running - its biggest recent success being its deployment in Haiti - World Vision is looking for ways to expand the program to other agencies and regions. In addition to the time savings, the organization has found another important use for the new digitized system: analytics.

Because the program stores information on the distribution and use of various types of aid, World Vision can begin to look at the effectiveness of its programs in a much more systematic way. In effect, LMMS takes World Vision into the same kind of analytics arena that supermarkets and other businesses have long mined, looking to better understand their customers by finding patterns in their consumption habits.

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