

Coordinating support for refugees

A public?private partnership in Tanzania

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The refugee camps near Kasulu, Tanzania, offer sanctuary for many thousands of people fleeing conflicts in neighbouring countries. For the relief agencies and NGOs that provide shelter and basic services, good communications are essential.

The residents of the Kigoma region, in northwestern Tanzania, face many challenges. Transportation and service infrastructures are weak, there are few economic opportunities, and more than half of the population live in poverty. The region has also been the destination of refugees fleeing conflicts in neighbouring Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Three refugee camps around Kasulu, established by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), now provide sanctuary for more than 350,000 refugees, who belong to many religious and ethnic groups, and speak a variety of languages. The international relief agencies are supported by numerous NGOs that provide shelter, food, and basic services such as healthcare and education.

Until recently, in this fragmented environment, coordination of the relief efforts was a real challenge, especially in view of the absence of a good communication infrastructure. Few NGO workers had access to radios or mobile phones to help them improve the effectiveness of their assistance.

In 1999 the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) approached Ericsson, a Swedish telecommunications company, to provide a mobile network infrastructure in the Kasulu refugee camps. Within the framework of its corporate social responsibility programme, Ericsson Response, the company has provided communications support to the IFRC in emergency situations around the world.

Contracting partners

Ericsson agreed to manage the project, and in 2001 drew up a set of contracts to formalise the partnership. One contract, with UNHCR, allowed Ericsson access to electricity within the camps. Ericsson also contracted Mobitel, a local mobile operator, to supply wireless mobile telephony and internet services to the NGOs working in the Kasulu camps using Ericsson's infrastructure.



The idea was that Ericsson would set up the infrastructure, while Mobitel would provide satellite connections and base stations, and operate the network. Mobitel also agreed to offer these services at subsidised rates to the NGOs, and at commercial rates to the rest of the region. The UNHCR and the IFRC, their local representative, the Tanzania Red Crescent Society (TRCS), and the NGOs would have access to inexpensive voice and data communications. Once installed, it was

also expected that the network would stimulate demand elsewhere in the region.

Since the launch of the network in 2002, all the partners involved in this public-private partnership have benefited. Ericsson was able to broaden its corporate social responsibility programme, and to strengthen its business partnership with Mobitel in Tanzania. Mobitel gained a captive market, since the UNHCR-TRCS and other NGOs provided guaranteed revenue. The company was also able to expand its mobile phone business among Kigoma's other residents - entrepreneurs, farmers and fishermen - at relatively little risk, and to increase its presence in Tanzania as a whole.

Most important, for the UNHCR and the NGOs, communications among the staff and refugee representatives, and with the outside world, were faster, simpler and cheaper, requiring minimal technical skills and resources. Thus the partnership served to improve the capacities of each organisation, while minimising the risks and the resources required.

Alignment of incentives

The alignment of incentives bodes well for the continued success of this public-private partnership. The partnership is also supported by formal contracts establishing a clear governance structure where responsibility for the different elements of the network can be easily tracked, and the leadership of Ericsson, as the awarder of all contracts, is clear.

Good communication is a prerequisite for effective coordination. The relief agencies and NGOs expect to be able to respond more quickly and effectively, and to provide more efficient services for the most vulnerable people in the region - the refugees within the camps.

At this stage the impacts of the partnership on the residents of the Kigoma region are difficult to assess. The better-off will certainly gain, as they will be able to pay for access to the network. Although the purpose of the partnership is not direct outreach to the poor, it is possible that the network will stimulate the economic development of the region, from which they too will benefit.

Links

[Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit \(CPSU\)](#)

[Ericsson Response programme](#)

[International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies \(IFRC\)](#)

[UN Refugee Agency \(UNHCR\)](#)

Further reading

A. Murray et al. (2002)

[Factors Shaping Successful Pro-poor ICT Public?Private Partnerships](#). CPSU.

This article is based on a study by the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit (CPSU) for the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The research was conducted in collaboration with the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute in Dhaka, and the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.