



# FRONTLINESMS at Plan International

Plan International, a global organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children around the world, is integrating FrontlineSMS, software for SMS reporting and communication, into some of its key programme areas. Since 2008, when staff gathered in Kenya to discuss the use of social media and new technology in their programme work, Plan has begun using FrontlineSMS in birth registration in Kenya and violence reporting in West Africa.

This case study will look at how Plan is using FrontlineSMS for violence tracking, the impact of the tool on this work, what they've learned and their plans for the future.

A Case Study

### **About Plan and FrontlineSMS**

Plan is one of the oldest and largest international organisations focusing on the rights and protection of children around the globe.

Through a range of programmes and the support of international donors, Plan works with over 3.5 million families and their communities in nearly 50 countries.

FrontlineSMS is an award-winning free, open source software that turns a laptop and a mobile phone or modem into a central communications hub. Once installed, the program enables users to send and receive text messages with groups of people through mobile phones. Because it uses text messages, it does not require an Internet connection and all data lives on the computer, rather than on a server controlled by someone else.

Users can send messages to individuals or large groups, and reply individually. It is easy to install and requires little or no training to use.

### **A Need for Reporting**

The UN Report on Violence Against Children (VAC) revealed some shocking statistics on violence against children – yet under-reporting means that we still don't know its true magnitude. Plan, one of the organisations that participated in the study, is now working with local, national and global partners to share the results and prevent and respond to violence against children.

In early 2009, Plan was working to strengthen both local and national reporting of trafficking and violence in Benin, West Africa. They were looking for a way to lower children's and community members' barriers to reporting, including the risk of reprisals and stigma, communications challenges, and access to places

where violence could be reported. The Plan team theorised that collecting reports via SMS, which is anonymous and low-cost, would encourage reporting and allow for a better understanding of the nature and the quantity of violence that was happening.

This in turn could be used to raise awareness around the severity of the problem, advocate for the necessary resources to prevent it, and develop better and more targeted response and follow-up mechanisms. The ability to visualise the data on a map could also have an impact on decision makers and might be a tool that children and youth could use to generate dialogue and advocate an end to cultural practices that allow for violence against them.

## FrontlineSMS and Plan: Starting SMS Reporting

The team decided to combine FrontlineSMS and Ushahidi, a digital mapping platform that crowdsources information via SMS, to reach their goal. Since Ushahidi does not have an SMS interface, it needs to be set up with another tool to collect the messages sent from a mobile phone; FrontlineSMS provides the simplest tool to do so.

The team began by conducting two workshops in Benin in February 2009 with youth leaders, frontline staff, community members, local authorities from the Center for Social Protection (CPS) and representatives from the Ministry of the Family.

The workshops sought to introduce the idea of using SMS reporting (FrontlineSMS) and digital mapping (Ushahidi) to strengthen local and national systems for reporting, tracking and responding to violence against children. They used the time to share and refine a basic idea of how the system might look.

The team followed up with participants and local authorities, and conducted awareness raising activities including promotion of SMS violence reporting in a youth radio programme, and tacking up posters around the community. Henri da Silva, Plan Benin's ICT Director who facilitated at the Benin workshops, went to Togo to replicate the training with staff and youth there, while watching the Benin pilot unfold and making adjustments to the set-up.

## Promising Beginnings

SMS reporting through the local FrontlineSMS set-up has begun to be utilised by children and other witnesses of violence in the community to speak out about what they have seen and experienced. Children and youth continue to conduct outreach in their communities to promote the number and to educate about the importance of reporting violence. Plan is working with local authorities to train them on how to manage and track using this new system.

While working to strengthen the reporting and tracking system, Plan is also looking into ways that local community committees can be more engaged in the process and the system, especially since in some cases government

systems are not reliable in terms of responding to reported cases. As incidents come into the tracking system, they will be used to discuss the situation in communities and with government leaders. Plan is also looking at ways that the SMS system could be linked with the national Child Helpline. The initiative is being monitored for learnings and to detect adjustments that need to be made along the way to improve on initial assumptions.



## Key Learning

ICT tools, including FrontlineSMS, can be invaluable but they must rest on an existing information and communications flow, and be part of a comprehensive approach that recognises the true capacity of stakeholders. In the Benin case study, staff are concerned that the expected increase in messages would overwhelm the low capacity to respond to reports in the local and national authorities. Plan Benin is working closely with the Ministry of the Family and the CPS with the aim of eventually handing over management to the authorities entirely. The information collected during the pilot phase will be used to advocate for more resources for prevention and response.

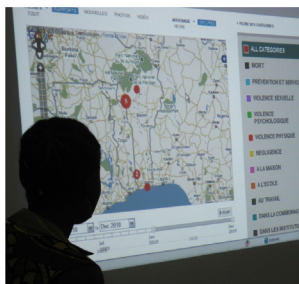
### Involving the users is critical:

Concern about state capacity had lead Plan staff to assume that the system couldn't get involved in managing cases but would need to be restricted to reporting. However, the excitement of the CPS, children, and Plan staff working at the district level changed the team's thinking, and during the workshop the system was adapted towards supplying information for future decisions as well as for immediate response. Local authorities did have concerns about their own capacity to respond, but embraced the system and its potential to help them do their jobs.

They suggested many ways to improve it, and fleshed out the original ideas on how the information

should flow to those responsible for responding and supporting victims, including local actors that hadn't been thought of during the initial design phase.

A significant difficulty was **finding appropriate modems** to work with FrontlineSMS. Ultimately a conference call with the FrontlineSMS team and involved Plan staff allowed for procurement of modems which worked as soon as they were plugged in. The team has also reported that people are calling the phone number rather than texting. They concluded that more outreach and promotion of the system and how it works are needed.



## Plans for the Future

Careful monitoring of impact and documenting and sharing learning will be critical for potential scaling to a national system in Benin and for sharing with other countries or for other similar initiatives.

The team is establishing indicators for the various steps/aspects outlined in the information flow diagram. As the system is piloted in these 2 departments in Benin, close attention will be paid to things like: additional costs to maintain the system; reporting and response rates; legal action in severe cases; adoption of the system and its sustained use by local entities/government bodies (Ministry of the Family and Center for Social Protection); suggestions from users on how to improve the system; privacy breaches at community level and any consequences;

numbers of verified cases; number of actual prosecution or action taken once cases are reported and verified; quality of local level promotion of the hotline and education to users on how to report; progress in obtaining the green (free text) line and factors deterring people at different levels from using the system.

The end goal, something to evaluate in the long term, is whether actual levels of violence and abuse go down over time, and what role this system had in that. Our main assumption — that education, awareness, reporting and response, and follow up action actually make a difference in reducing violence — needs also to be confirmed.

Overall, Plan International sees many future potential uses for SMS technology and FrontlineSMS.



# Plan

Suppliers and hardware used:  
Nokia 6230 (locally procured)  
Nokia PC suite on Windows XP Professional Service pack 3  
Moving to a Falcom SAMBA 75 instead of the phone.

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