Case study: Noula and the local technological response

The Noula project (Kreyol for ‘We are Here’) was a web-based system for mapping local needs and sources of assistance. It was developed immediately after the January 12th earthquake by a Haitian technology company called Solutions. The project began a few days after the disaster, and was an idea that came out of a staff meeting. As Solutions’ founder, Kurt Jean Charles, said, “We felt so powerless. We didn’t have any medical skills, any nursing skills. So we had our first meeting five days after the earthquake, got everyone together. We decided we had to do something, as therapy for us, but also as something that could be useful for the emergency but that would also be helpful for the long term too.”

“In the neighbourhood they created a committee and they invited me to a meeting. So people were starting to talk together to decide how to organise themselves to get out of this apocalyptic situation. This is where I started to get the idea for the platform. The first thing people wanted was a simple list of the casualties around us, and the resources – where they could get access to a doctor, a nurse, anything that could be helpful, so that was organised. We realised that the focus that we had in our little neighbourhood was seriously lacking at the level of the government and the coordination of the different NGOs. So the simple thing we were doing in our neighbourhood, what if we can embed this as a tool for the government and NGOs? It was the simple idea of getting a list and getting information regularly from people around us.”

The team began building the system, working through the night in tents set up in the office garden. The concept was of an online mapping system that would be available to the wider population. Staff set up a call centre for people to call in with needs and queries. Operators were given a two-day training in client management and a day’s training from a psychologist in handling calls. They were provided with a script to use when answering the phone.

“We thought about SMS, about access to the Internet, but we thought that the most user-friendly interface would be a simple phone. Voila donated the shortcode number *177 for free because they believed in our concept, and we launched the system on Feb 21st and then we started getting calls from the population. We didn’t expect it to work the way it did. Somehow it went further than what we had in mind. Some of us were afraid about the response of the population because we had a lot of stress, a lot of anger. How would people use this service? But it turned out that less than three calls in 100 were calls from angry people. Most of them you could feel the relief of the person to have access to someone else to talk about their situation. We wanted to stay very honest with them because it was part of the script that people had to answer the calls. We said: Noula cannot do something directly to respond to a need but we promise that we will make your message available to all the responders and all the public authorities and NGOs that had a responsibility.”

The original Noula concept was to connect the mapped needs with NGOs and the Haitian authorities. Kurt went first to the Direction de la Protection Civile (DPC) where it was clear they did not have the capacity to engage with Noula. He also met with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of
Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), who was interested in the idea and could see the value but was not equipped to engage.

Kurt’s perception is that Noula may have been seen as competition with one response, and that aid agencies were not comfortable with Noula’s level of transparency. Kurt also felt that international organisations were wary of the fact Noula was a citizen initiative but one coming from the private sector and assumed he was looking for business.

The breakthrough for Noula came when they connected with Ushahidi, a non-profit software company that develops free and open source software for information collection, visualisation and interactive mapping. Ushahidi saw Noula as a vital local counterpart and longer-term host of the platform, and provided some financial support. Through Ushahidi, Noula was able to start meaningful discussions with aid organisations. They presented at Communications with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Haiti and developed formal partnerships with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

It was very difficult to measure the impact or usefulness of Noula for earthquake-affected communities. Records were not kept and since this was a private initiative, it did not have a monitoring and evaluation component. But the call centre received 25,000 calls in six months with no advertising, which suggests at least that 25,000 people saw sufficient value in the service to try to use it.

Two other aspects of the Noula system carried important lessons for future responses. The first was that in the months following the earthquake the team received a high volume of calls from survivors who had left Port au Prince but wanted to know how they could claim aid in their new location. There was no way to check the veracity of these calls, but this suggested that call centres have huge potential to help survivors find information about their rights and entitlements in a new area. The data could also have been very useful in analysing the needs of those who had left.

The second was the frustration Kurt notes at seeing mistakes in some of the humanitarian products such as lists of camps – errors obvious to a local but invisible to someone who did not know the country. He argues that engagement of local capacity could have done a great deal to assist humanitarian workers in developing accurate and real-time on-the-ground information in a fast-changing situation.

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1 Where the needs are published on the site as well as the response, and aid agencies are invited to post details of everything they are doing.
2 Noula manages a call centre and mapping platform for IFRC’s camp return work, and is developing feedback systems for other IOM communication products.