

SHARING CRITICAL INFORMATION

The right information in the right hands

can go a long way toward preventing abuse and advancing human rights. However, even in today's globalized and technology-saturated society, this can be a real challenge. The tactics included in this section demonstrate innovative ways to share critical information with people who can help prevent abuse, with those who may be in danger of suffering abuse and with large groups of people who can speak out to prevent it. Some of these tactics make sophisticated use of new technologies while others rely on person-to-person contact. All of them demonstrate the old maxim: knowledge is power.

Anti-Violence Phone Network: Using mobile phones to create a network of communication that can stop violence before it escalates.

TACTIC

In the seemingly intractable conflict in Northern Ireland, finding common ground between politicized Catholic and Protestant factions has often proven nearly impossible. And yet there are people on both sides who want to prevent outbreaks of violence. This tactic involves identifying leaders in each community who want to prevent violence and arming them with needed information.

Interaction Belfast (formerly known as Springfield Inter-Community Development Project) created a mobile phone network to prevent outbreaks of violence between volatile neighborhoods in Belfast. Volunteers in both Catholic and Protestant communities are given mobile phones to communicate with their counterparts across the interface when potentially violent crowds gather or when rumors of violence start to spread.

An "interface" is an area where Catholic (Nationalist/Republican) and Protestant (Unionist/Loyalist) neighborhoods abut one another. Typically divided by physical walls, neighborhoods along the interfaces tend to be among the most economically deprived communities in Northern Ireland. Suspicion about what is happening on the other side of the wall can cause or escalate violent incidents.

Volunteers from both sides meet weekly and their phones are always on. During events that are likely to cause violence, such as sporting events or Protestant parades through Catholic neighborhoods, the network plans ahead to monitor key areas. Volunteers recognize that they are able to intervene most effectively in cases of "recreational violence" — youth seeking excitement or responding to rumors — but are able to do little in cases of organized or paramilitary violence.

When volunteers see or hear of crowds gathering along the interface, or hear rumors of violence about to occur on the other side, they call their counterparts across the interface. Volunteers calm crowds on their own sides before the incidents become violent.

Since the program began, the phone network has both prevented violence and provided communities on both sides of the interface with more accurate information when violence does occur. The weekly meetings of volunteers have also created a core group of people engaged in regular cross-community dialogue. As these relationships have matured, the network has also begun to address other common problems facing both communities, including long-term revitalization of the area.

The widespread use of mobile telephone technology has made rapid responses to imminent and ongoing abuse more possible now than ever. In Northern Ireland the telephones made communication possible even when the two sides did not at first have a particularly strong relationship, but were committed to ending the violence.

When kids gather at the interface rumors often spread as to what they're up to, and that in itself can attract others to gather at the other side of that interface.... But when you can phone people on the other side and check whether anything is actually going on or not, it means you can go back to your own crowd and quell those rumors.

Before we had the network established, we had kids on our side of the interface coming up and claiming, "They're doing this over there" or "They're doing that," and we didn't know any differently. But now we have a means of counteracting all that.

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— Member of the Springfield Inter-Community Development Project Phone Network, now Interaction Belfast, Northern Ireland

Mobile Phones Help Keep Elections Honest: Transmitting vote tallies by mobile phone to prevent tampering.

Mobile phone networks can also be useful in other situations when time is of the essence. For example, during and immediately following elections, control of ballot boxes and vote tallies is critical. In Kenya, mobile phone networks have been used to keep elections fair and honest — thereby preserving people’s right to take part in the government of their country — by reporting vote tallies before they could be tampered with.

During Kenya’s 2002 presidential elections, independent monitoring groups used mobile phones to keep the election process honest by immediately reporting vote tallies from each polling place.

In previous elections, votes had to be physically transported to key counting points before any results could be released. Although observers monitored this process, the delay did leave open the possibility of fraud, or at least the suspicion of fraud. The instant communication provided by mobile phones (in many Kenyan polling stations there are no fixed land lines) made it difficult to change results.

Two groups given credentials by the election commission to observe the vote count monitored the election: the Institute for Education in Democracy (IED) and the Kenya Domestic Observer Programme (K-DOP). IED volunteers were stationed in 178 of Kenya’s 210 constituencies. Volunteers used their own phones and were given an allowance of 2000 Kenyan shillings (about US\$26). They called a central IED office to report as soon as votes were counted; the numbers were posted immediately on the Internet. Volunteers also called in to report violence and malpractice. The IED results were available even before the official results of the Kenya’s electoral commission, largely because the commission had a more complicated protocol for releasing results.

K-DOP also used a network of volunteers, but did not have standard provisions for reimbursement. Kenyan election commission officers also reported results by phone, using government-supplied satellite phones or their own mobile phones where no land lines existed.

The transparency created by the quick and independent reporting of these several networks helped prevent the violence that may have occurred had people on the losing side of the election suspected fraud. The fast reporting forced both the major candidates and their supporters to accept the results as legitimate.

Mobile phones are increasingly used to ensure that elections are fair and to preserve the basic human right of expressing one’s will in a free and genuine election. Even fast communication, however, cannot always speed up bureaucracy. One observer in Kenya noted that, while officials used mobile phones to report problems such as voters not included in the rolls, some voters were still turned away because of the complicated protocols involved in fixing the problem.

Mobile phones have been used in other recent elections around the world. During the 2000 elections in Peru, nonpartisan monitors from the Peruvian organization Transparencia telephoned turnout numbers, evaluations of the quality of the voting and counting processes, and precinct election results to a central data analysis center from a randomly selected sample of polling stations across the country. Some reports came from remote

regions of the Andes and Amazon regions. Transparencia’s data analysis prompted national and international pressure for Alberto Fujimori to accept a run-off election.

How might you be able to use mobile phones or other forms of technology to improve your work and help strengthen human rights?

Survivors Know What Questions to Ask: Involving survivors of human rights abuse in the identification and rescue of potential victims.

Survivors of human rights abuse have a unique knowledge of the form abuse can take and a unique ability to recognize it. Such information can be used to prevent others from suffering the same fate. The organization Maiti Nepal enlists women who have been trafficked to help save other women and girls.

Maiti Nepal works to stop trafficking of women and girls across the Nepal-India border by interviewing those who appear vulnerable. The Maiti interviewers are more likely to recognize others in dangerous situations because many of them, too, are survivors of trafficking.

Increasing demand for sex workers in Indian brothels and other markets is increasing trafficking in Nepal. One way to combat the problem is to prevent traffickers from crossing the border, but border police often fail to identify potential victims or simply look the other way.

Maiti Nepal works closely with the border guards at 11 transit points along Nepal’s borders to confront suspicious travelers. They stop every car and rickshaw. If there are women or girls traveling with men, the border guards question the men while Maiti Nepal’s staff question the women. They ask questions such as “Why are you going to India?” and “How long have you known this man?” and observe the women’s body language, dress and make-up. During the interview, they also tell the women about the sex trade in India.

If the travelers’ stories are inconsistent, the suspected traffickers are apprehended by the police and the women and girls are taken to safe transit homes Maiti Nepal has constructed near the border. Here they receive food, counseling, and, if they wish, medical exams and transportation back to their home villages. In the event that relatives are unwilling to take someone back, or are found to have participated in the trafficking, Maiti Nepal provides counseling and job training.

Hundreds of potential victims have been rescued as a result of this tactic and cases have been brought against alleged traffickers, putting pressure on local administrations to take action against the criminals.

In situations that involve trafficking, domestic violence, child molestation or forced prostitution, outsiders may not always recognize abuse as easily as survivors do. Potential victims may also be more likely to respond to someone with personal knowledge of what they are going through. The participation of abuse survivors is thus central to the implementation of this tactic. When victims are willing to prevent future abuses, their unique knowledge of how human rights violations are carried out can be invaluable to those working to end such violations. Also crucial in the tactic is Maiti Nepal’s successful collaboration with the border guards and its care not to return girls to families complicit in their trafficking.

Protecting Rights on a Time Limit: Informing potential victims of their rights when there is a time limit on protecting those rights.

Sometimes laws themselves impose arbitrary and brief windows of opportunity for individuals to act to protect their rights. The Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation (CERA) in Ontario, Canada, uses a rapid-response tactic to inform people of their rights and their deadline for action.

The Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation (CERA) in Ontario, Canada, contacts tenants at risk of eviction and gives them the information they need to avoid eviction. Canadian law limits to five days the time tenants have to dispute evictions, and many people do not have the information or resources to react quickly enough to prevent eviction.

In 1998, a new law was passed in Ontario that allowed landlords to raise the rent to market rates when a rental unit is vacant, giving them an incentive to evict tenants, particularly in communities with low vacancy rates. Every year approximately 60,000 people in Ontario face eviction.

CERA petitioned the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal for lists of tenants facing eviction. It receives the lists on the condition that it maintain the privacy of the tenants. CERA mails an information package to each tenant whose landlord has applied for an eviction order. Volunteers then follow up with a call to inform tenants of their rights before the five-day period has lapsed. During these conversations, the volunteers inform tenants that their landlords applied to evict them, discuss possible options and refer them to relevant agencies. They also ask tenants about the situation that led to the eviction, which provides important information about the causes of housing insecurity that CERA and other organizations can use to prevent the problem in the first place.

CERA reaches about 25,000 people each year. After the program started, eviction rates for those reached by telephone declined more than 20%. Since March 2003, however, CERA has been unable to continue the Eviction Prevention project due to a Privacy Commission ruling prohibiting the release of eviction data. CERA is currently in the process of appealing the decision.

While Ontario housing laws do give people the right to dispute their evictions, not all tenants have the information they need to protect those rights in the limited time allowed. CERA's tactic helps get that information to them in time to use it. CERA did need to obtain a list of people facing eviction, and the challenge in other

cases may be a lack of such information. In addition, not all tenants are reachable by telephone, and not everyone is willing or able to put in the effort to fight for their rights.

Is a rapid response network needed for your struggle? If so, what type of network would be useful?

Skills for a Population At Risk: Using nonformal education techniques to give an at-risk population the skills needed to thrive in a changing economy.

In Mongolia in the 1990s, as in many other societies in transition, the shift from a state-run to a market economy threatened to leave women (and therefore children) behind, in danger of poverty, hunger and abuse. The Gobi Women's Project sought to bring the women of Mongolia's isolated rural areas the information they needed to succeed in the emerging economic system.

The Mongolian government used nonformal education tools such as the radio, printed materials and visiting teachers to reach out to marginalized and vulnerable Gobi women and teach them the new skills they needed to survive in a market economy.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Mongolia's centralized, state-run economy also came to an end. People who had lived their whole lives on collective farms became responsible for obtaining their own herds and producing and marketing their own goods and services. Many did not have the skills or resources to do this. Nomadic women in the Gobi Desert, an area with an extremely harsh climate and poor communication and transportation systems, were particularly vulnerable. Without trade and commercial skills the women and their children were at risk of poverty, malnutrition and, potentially, violence and abuse.

The government formed the Gobi Women's Project and invited all women in the Gobi Desert to a community planning forum to look for ways to address the problem. The group decided that single mothers with at least three children were the highest priority group, and that radio programs, combined with other nonformal education techniques, were the best way to reach them. (Nonformal education refers to learning programs that are not obligatory and take place outside of a school.)

The radio programs provided information on trade skills (such as producing wool, refining camel fleece and making felt, saddles and traditional clothes), commercial skills (such as negotiating prices and planning) and health issues (such as family planning, hygiene, nutrition and first aid). The programs were broadcast twice a week at times when most women would be likely to listen, usually in the evening. Cassettes were available in local learning centers for anyone who was not able to hear the program. Companion materials were produced for use with the radio programs, and visiting teachers checked the women's progress and offered supplementary materials.

The nonformal education approach succeeded in mobilizing the women to take control of their economic future. They organized local markets, initiated collaborative projects across communities, and encouraged broadening the project to include their husbands and children.

In this case, this skills-building tactic was used to ensure economic rights, but similar nonformal education programs are used to reach distant populations on other issues as well. It is vital to note that the staff of the Gobi Women's Project took into account the lifestyle and the culture of the women they were trying to reach when designing their programs and choosing their media.

How could nonformal education programs be used to strengthen human rights in your community?

PREVENTION	Region	Initiating Sector	Target Sector	Focus	Human Rights Issue
Sharing Critical Information	Americas	Civil Society	Society	Local	Right to housing

Region	Initiating Sector	Target Sector	Focus	Human Rights Issue	PREVENTION
Asia	Government	Society	National	Development	Sharing Critical Information

Providing Information and Skills Needed to Claim Rights: Empowering people to use the legal system to exert their rights.

Constitutional guarantees of certain rights are often not protected by law or implemented in reality. Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg gives people the information and skills they need to claim their constitutional right not to serve in the military or to return to units in which they have suffered ill-treatment.

Soldiers' Mothers of Saint Petersburg educates conscripts, army recruits and family members of Russian soldiers about their legal rights so that they can effectively exercise them.

In Russia all young men are required to serve in the military. While a 1993 law exempts men for reasons of poor health or hardship (e.g. their parents are retired or ill, or they are still in school), inscription commissions regularly violate this law. Soldiers' Mothers has documented cases in which young men with physical or psychological problems that should have exempted them from military service have been forced to serve. Inscription commissions have even been known to conduct round-ups with the cooperation of police, on the street, in schools and in dormitories, even going house to house. Once in the military, the young men are subject to terrible conditions, including degrading and substandard living conditions, nightly beatings and torture.

At the school for human rights run by Soldiers' Mothers, known as "Let Us Protect Our Sons," students are taught how to make use of the laws that protect their rights. They are also encouraged to trust that the law can protect them and to support each other and help each other deal with their fears.

Training sessions are held once a week and last three hours. They include specific instruction on how to write statements to the authorities, as well as role-playing and discussions about the law and human rights. A guidebook is also published annually.

Most people are able to obtain documentation from civilian physicians to present to the military physicians. Soldiers' Mothers, with a staff of ten as well as many Russian and foreign volunteers, follows up with participants through questionnaires and keeps a file for each person and district. Participants who succeed in their petitions for exemption are asked to speak to later groups. About 120,000 people have participated in the training sessions over 12 years, and 90,000 have protected their legal right not to serve in the army. Approximately 5,000 people who were tortured in the army have successfully petitioned not to return to their units.

While, in theory, constitutional protections do exist in Russia for young men who fear abuse or who have been abused in the military, lack of information and fear of using the legal system (a system that has not been commonly used by individuals) keeps them from taking advantage of those rights. Soldiers' Mothers provides information about those rights, skills such as letter-writing, and guidance through the legal system.

Fighting Corruption through Transparency: Tracking the work of government officials online to fight corruption.

In South Korea the government of Seoul is encouraging its own officials to act more honestly by sharing critical information with anyone who has an Internet connection.

The city government in Seoul, South Korea, has created an online database to increase government transparency. Online Procedures Enhancement for Civil Applications (OPEN) allows city residents to monitor details of civil applications related to 70 municipal government tasks that have been identified as the most prone to corruption, including housing and construction projects, environmental regulation and urban planning.

Before OPEN's development, applicants for government permits were not able to see how their applications were being processed. The process was opaque, rather than transparent, allowing corrupt government officials to demand a bribe to move the application forward.

Now, when officials receive or update applications, they fill out standardized data entry forms. The forms are used by each department to update the online database. Through the database, applicants can find out who has their applications, when they can expect the application process to be complete, reasons for delay and, if an application has been declined, reasons for its rejection.

OPEN was instituted in conjunction with other initiatives to fight corruption. These include stricter penalties for officials who solicit or accept bribes, a Corruption Report Card to the mayor, a phone line citizens can use to alert the mayor's offices to cases of corruption and rotating officials among departments to prevent cronyism.

The OPEN website receives about 2,500 hits per day. An Internet survey by the Seoul City Government reported that 78.7 percent of citizens surveyed believed OPEN was effectively decreasing government corruption. Recently, the government also started disclosing information about 35 city government committees. This means that citizens can also monitor the management of committees through the OPEN System.

While OPEN serves to prevent corruption in individual applications for government services, it is also an intervention on a broader level, seeking to end ongoing abuses. One factor in the system's success has been the active involvement and ongoing support of the mayor's office. Without such support of high-ranking people with public legitimacy, a system like OPEN would be difficult to implement. The success of this anti-corruption tactic is also strengthened by widespread Internet use in the country.