

# Voices for good governance



**Project:** SMS Voices – community reporting pilot project  
**Theme:** Decentralisation  
**Location:** Koinadugu and Bo Districts  
**Publication date:** June 2014

**SMS Voices is a pioneering governance pilot project launched by ENCISS in January 2014, designed to encourage transparent dialogue between citizens and local councillors through a custom-built SMS (text message) system. This community reporting pilot project has helped to strengthen the interaction between the state and citizens in the participating areas. Here, we highlight some initial findings from the first five months of the pilot.**

## Encouraging dialogue

Mobile communications is a rapidly growing sector across many countries in Africa. Whether it's by sending weather forecasts, receiving news alerts or transferring money, mobile phones are presenting new ways for people to access services.

ENCISS has been tapping into this trend by piloting an innovative community reporting initiative that uses mobile technology to strengthen interaction between citizens and their councillors in Bo and Koinadugu Districts.

The project, SMS Voices, sees volunteer citizens in these two distinct parts of the country sending regular text message reports to their councillors, highlighting issues of concern in their communities.

Falling under the work of ENCISS output 4, SMS voices aims to facilitate transparent conversation between citizens and councillors, build the capacity of local councils to engage in responsive decision making, and increase councillors' local-level accountability to their constituents.

In its first five months, SMS Voices has already demonstrated the potential to serve as an effective channel of communication between the state and its citizens, and as a way of building the capacity of councillors to carry out their functions.

Nine ward councillors and 45 citizens – including representatives of civil society groups – have been participating in the pilot since January. Bo and

Koinadugu were selected for the project because they represented two ends of Sierra Leone's political spectrum, offered different governance structures, have different demographics and levels of mobile phone coverage, and are locations with established ENCISS projects.

From the onset, there was strong buy-in from the participating councils. SMS Voices was seen as a possible 'PR' tool for the councillors, who felt that much of their work goes unseen. Councillors felt that their participation in the project would add to their reputation as forward-thinking, engaged officials. The potential savings to time and money spent travelling to different wards was also raised as a further positive outcome.



Participants at a training session in Bo, in January.

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**“This innovative project enables us to gather information that will allow civil society to monitor and follow up on the councils’ work at a local level”**

*ENCISS Programme Director Alpha Sankoh*

## Participants

Since the medium is SMS, those who struggle with formal literacy are able to take part in the project. The community reporters range from farmers and teachers to students and traders, ensuring a wide spectrum of voices can be heard.

Participation is voluntary, but monthly phone credit is provided to cover the cost of reports. All the participants completed a three-day training workshop in Bo and Kabala in early January. As well as technical instruction, they were given training on areas such as micro-reporting, the five reporting themes, crowd-sourcing, attribution and ‘fact vs. opinion’.

ENCISS is partnering with UK Communications NGO Radar to deliver the project. Radar staff member Corin Faife, who trained the participants, said: ‘At the initial stages there was some suspicion from councillors that the system would be used to “check up” on them. But as training progressed, almost all came to feel that the information they could access through taking part could have a large benefit to them.’

## Feedback loop

SMS Voices aims to emphasise constructive engagement rather than confrontation with elected officials. As such, rather than being transmitted directly between the reporters’ and councillors’ handsets, all messages are all sent, verified and stored through a custom-built online platform (see Appendix B). This ensures anonymity and freedom for the reporters, while also promoting transparency within the project.

Each ‘micro-report’ filed by the reporters is approximately 20 words and relates to one of five themes: gender, youth, justice and security, governance, or access to essential services (including health and education). Councillors are encouraged to



**SMS Voices participants at a training session in Bo**

reply with their own text message, addressing the concerns raised and explaining their plans for dealing with the issues. This effectively creates a ‘feedback loop’. The SMS ‘thread’ can only be closed by the reporter, once they feel they are satisfied with the response. Meanwhile, reporters can only open one ‘thread’ at a time: this rule was created to avoid the councillors being overloaded with messages.

## Reporting figures

In the first month of the pilot, 64 reports were sent, followed by 20 in the second month, 26 in the third and 52 in the first (two month) period of the pilot extension. To date, access to services has been the most commonly reported theme, with education, water, corruption, refuse, roads and health being the most popular topics within this.

Messages have included reports concerning faulty water hand pumps, lack of school teaching materials, insufficient supplies of medication in local hospitals, unsafe roads and bridges, relationships between okada riders and police, issues of local conflict, access to water and sanitation, the supply of mosquito nets and ineffective waste management, giving councillors a picture of the needs of their communities. In May/June, the number of health-related reports peaked, particularly in Bo, in light of the Ebola outbreak and concerns over the community response to the virus.

## Pilot extension

**The SMS Voices pilot had originally been due to run for three months, from mid-January to the end of April. However, after the promising start, Christian Aid and ENCISS took a decision to extend the project by a further four months, to allow it time to meet its full potential. It will now run until September 2014, giving citizens a further chance to make their voices heard. ENCISS is hopeful that this next stage of the extension**

	BO		KOINADUGU		COMBINED			
	Reports	Responses	Reports	Responses	TOTAL responses	TOTAL responses	Percentage of active reporters (%)	Percentage of active councillors (%)
Month 1	32	12	32	22	64	34	69	89
Month 2	9	4	11	1	20	5	31	33
Month 3	14	8	12	9	26	17	35.5	67
Extension: May - June (10 weeks)	30	16	22	15	52	31	40	89

In turn, responses from councillors have included pledges to investigate matters, discuss the issue at council meetings, take the matter to chiefdom authorities, or pass on the information to the relevant individual or body (such as a Mayor, or the police force). In their replies, councillors have also advised reporters to give an issue time to be resolved, supplied them with background information about the causes of the issue, promised to follow up the matter themselves, and updated the report on an action that has already been taken to resolve the matter at hand.

### A better flow of communication

Reporters have told ENCISS that the project has already created an increased sense of responsibility and engagement about issues affecting their community, greater awareness and appreciation of

the councillors' work, and a better flow of communication between citizens and councils.

Meanwhile, councillors have reported that the project is helping them to gather information about local issues, stay accountable to citizens in their wards, and build their capacity for responding swiftly and effectively to community concerns. In short, that it has contributed towards a more inclusive and participatory governance landscape in the wards.

There have also been early indications of positive impact at community level. For instance, during two refresher training sessions held in Bo and Kabala in April 2014, a number of participants highlighted examples of tangible changes which they believed were directly attributable to, or supported by, SMS reports sent in the first three months of the pilot.

#### Positive developments cited included:

- the rehabilitation of seven hand pump wells in Sinkunia (Ward 165, Koinadugu);
- an improved waste management system following the creation of a new garbage site in Yogomaia (Ward 148, Koinadugu)
- the commencement of a school building project (Ward 235, Bo)
- the rehabilitation of feeder roads at five different sites (Ward 160, Koinadugu)
- the introduction of a police warden to direct traffic at a high-risk junction (Ward 235, Bo)
- an improvement in the relationship between cattle and crop farmers (Ward 165, Koinadugu).



A sample micro-report written during SMS Voices training in Kabala, in January

ENCISS is following up on such cases, to gain more insight into the outcomes achieved.

Meanwhile, headline information on the reports and trends is being shared with ENCISS implementing partners, ward development committees and local councillors. It is hoped this information will inform their work and inspire further discussion and action, including dialogue events between CSOs and local government.

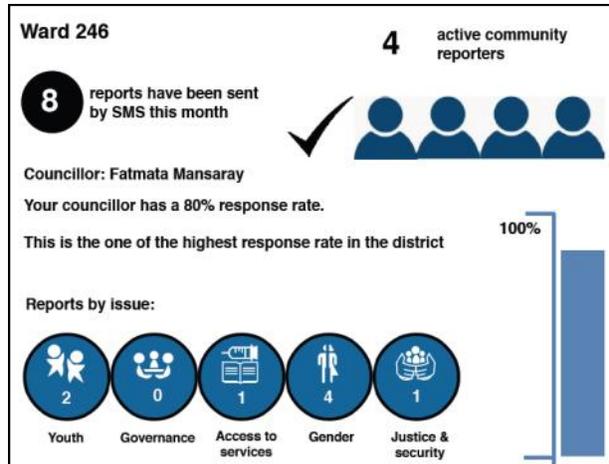
One community reporter, Evelyn Turay from Ward 235 in Bo, was enthusiastic about the project's impact so far. 'It's making a lot of improvements, because whenever I send a report to my councillor he promises that he will take an action,' she said.

'I have seen change. Especially in terms of the gender issues that I normally report on. I have now seen council officials in the community raising awareness on issues around teenage pregnancy and early sexual activities: issues that lead to early marriage and under-development. The project has helped my councillor to do his job better. He even told me: "Evelyn, you have helped me in my job so much".'

Her ward councillor, Martin M B Goba, agreed: 'It's been challenging, but it's helping me to improve on my job; to know the issues, to know the problems in my community, so that I can find solutions to them. Some of the problems have been taken to the council, and they have tried to assist me and have started some development activities in my community as a result.'

## Promoting participation

While there have been successes, levels of participation among different wards has varied greatly, and achieving a sufficient level of engagement among both reporters and councillors has proved to be a key challenge in the project. After a positive start, the second month saw a dip in the number of reports submitted and responses given. Commenting on this, Radar highlighted the 'direct correlation between a lack of councillor engagement and a decline in citizen



**Ward summary sheets have been created, to display on community noticeboards in participating wards.**

reporting'. However, they further explained that 'a tailing off of activity is partly to be expected after the initial peak of the project launch'.

In its second data report, for Feb-March, Radar addresses this issue, saying: 'Where there have been few other means of easily reporting issues prior to the new system, there is often a bank of concerns, often reoccurring, that have been lingering for a while within the citizen group. The introduction of a new reporting system gives them a chance to raise these issues formally either for the first time, or in a new way.'

'Once these reports have been logged, there is often a lag before the citizen groups become aware of new issues, or wish to wait to see action on the first issue before continuing to report. However there are some cooling factors which can be addressed in collaboration with ENCISS in order to pull up activity to a steady and sustainable level over the next month.'

Radar began to reach out to reporters, via text message, to try to increase activity levels. This exercise shed light on some of the challenges reporters were facing, which was affecting their levels of participation. These included technical problems, ill-health, lost mobile phone handsets, frequent travel, low levels of councillor engagement and difficulty accessing newsworthy information from the information.

Consequently, ENCISS and Radar began working to help overcome these issues. For instance, by contacting reporters and councillors to encourage their continued involvement in the project. This was successful in fostering participation: activity levels increased in the third month, with a steady inflow of reports, an incremental rise in reports and some

EXAMPLES OF REPORTS FROM MONTH 1	
Report	Councillor response
Girl child pupils are taken out of school for mining in Kania Village on 10 February because of lack of understanding	I think I have to inform the councillors of that ward to sensitize Kania community people about girl child education
The second bridge has broken some 50 yards from Sinkunia to Gbindi because it is now overdue/ expired	I will give this report during the council meeting on 27 February 2014
Scrap metal collection by school age kids on the increase in Sewa section since January 2014	I will refer this issue to social welfare gender and children's affair for prompt intervention.
According to youth they need to repair the hand well pump at Kondeya Village.	It should be done by council any time from now. Follow up with be made later.

promising developments. What's more, in the first part of the extension period (end of April to end of June), there was an increase in reporter and councillor engagement. In the same period, four reporters submitted reports for the first time since the pilot began. Meanwhile, a number of others who had not submitted reports for some time also began to engage with their councillors again. It is hoped this trend will continue, as the project progresses, outreach continues and participants become more confident in their use of the system.

Within each district, the numbers of reports sent changes from month to month. For instance, Ward 235 was the least active ward in the second month of the pilot, but was the most active in the third month. Radar's analysis suggests that these spikes and dips in participation are 'natural fluctuations,' rather than a sign of lack of engagement: 'Whereas stabilisation of reporting indicates valuable and sustained engagement with the project, the upward turn in reporting in some wards suggests previous drops do not represent ongoing disengagement with the project, but rather natural fluctuations,' it said.

### **Councillor engagement**

In the second and third months, the ward with the highest number of reports was also the ward with the highest number of councillor responses. Moreover, with councillors in wards 160, 230 and 231 failing to respond to a single report for the first three months, it is perhaps no surprise that these wards have consistently evidenced the lowest number of reports.

What is emerging from this picture, as well as from feedback given during refresher training sessions in

April, is that councillor participation is critical to the success of the project. Radar continues to undertake comprehensive outreach, with the aim of extending the successes of those wards with active councillor participation to those yet to achieve it.

This work is bearing some fruit. In the first reporting period of the pilot extension, councillor participation was the most successful to date, with eight of the nine councillors engaging with their reporters – two for the first time since the project began, following targeted outreach from Radar. Meanwhile, a number of councillors responded to their reporters with admirable dedication in terms of their pledges to resolve issues.

### **Two-way dialogues**

While there is evidently value in one-way reporting (that is, one report, no response) and two-way reporting (that is, one report, one response), a key aim of the SMS Voices project is to stimulate dialogue, rather than just call and response reporting. As most of the participants were new to the concept of micro-reporting, it was expected that longer dialogue-based communication would take time to emerge. April saw the first protracted exchange between a reporter and councillor – a back and forth dialogue, representing a significant development.

In the period from late April to late June, the frequency of dialogues increased: five separate dialogues were initiated by five different reporters, representing the promising development hoped for. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these dialogues took place in the wards with the most engaged and responsive councillors, once again evidencing the critical nature of councillor participation. It is believed that with sustained and

### An example of a report created using crowd-sourced information



targeted outreach from Radar, these dialogues will become more common.

‘Although it has taken time to emerge a number of councillors are evidently now very comfortable using the system in this way, suggesting dialogues will become more prevalent in future,’ said Radar.

### ‘Crowd-sourcing’

The pilot has results in the effective crowd-sourcing of reports: this relates to the way that reporters have been looking to various parts of the community to provide information for their reports.

Whereas in the first month, the majority of reports came from a first person perspective, 25% reports in the second month indicated active reporting on behalf of others in the community, 35% in the third month, and 44% in the period from late April to June. This suggests that reporters are voicing not just their own concerns, but the concerns of others in their wards, as had been hoped.

In the third month, it appeared that a significant number of the reports were being made on behalf of youth in the community. This data confirms some key feedback received at the refresher training sessions: that the project has increased the participation of youth in development.

The aforementioned half-day refresher sessions were held on April 4 in Bo and April 24 in Kabala. Overall, participants indicated great enthusiasm for the project and provided valuable feedback on the direct impact of the reporting. As well as offering additional training, the workshops gave participants – both reporters and councillors – a chance to give feedback on the project so far. Areas such as key successes, obstacles, experiences of the participants were discussed, as were suggestions for potential areas for improvement.

The feedback gathered was largely positive, with some useful suggestions for improvement including the provision of ID cards, which have now been supplied to the reporters. The majority of participants expressed the view that there had been tangible positive impacts

as a consequence of their reporting, whilst also expressing their desire and enthusiasm for the pilot to be extended.

### Key challenges Identified by participants

As well as providing an opportunity to recap on how to use the system and gain insight into the strengths of the project, one of the core aims of the refresher training was to gather feedback on the challenges experienced by participants. The challenges identified broadly reflect three categories; human challenges, technical challenges and partner participation:

i) Low or no response from councillors: a number of reporters felt aggrieved by the lack of, or late, response from councillors, which they believed was affecting the project’s success. As a result, ENCISSE and Radar pledged to step up the outreach to the less communicative councillors, in a bid to increase engagement.

On the other hand, councillors reported that reporters were not always consistent and helpful in their messages. As such, if the project continues beyond September, Radar plans to implement close monitoring and further outreach, to increase understanding and interactions between reporters and councillors.



Community reporter ID cards were given to all participants at the start of the pilot extension period.

ii) Difficulty getting information from community. Some reporters said they faced resistance when sourcing information from particular areas of the community. In order to address this issue, ENCISS, Christian Aid and Radar agreed to provide each of the reporters with reporter ID cards. These were issued in May, and are valid the duration of the extension. It is hoped these cards will facilitate the gathering of information, and will help the reporters and others to recognise that they have a tangible and credible role in the community.

iii) Little incentive to report. Reporters at the refresher training requested financial remuneration for their participation, or provision of free mobile handsets. While neither ENCISS or Radar were able to provide financial incentives for the pilot, it was hoped that providing ID cards and informing participants about the impact of their work would act as an incentive in itself.

iv) Top-up credit not received by everyone. The provision of monthly mobile phone top-up was intended to facilitate and incentivise participation. As such, it was decided that only active participants would receive top-up credit. 'There is little reason for those not reporting to receive compensation,' Radar pointed out. Although the first month's top-up was distributed to all participants, in the second month it was given on

a case-by-case basis.

v) Mobile phone battery life. A number of reporters requested that Radar/ENCISS cover the cost of charging telephones. However, it was recognised that the amount of battery required in order to send reports was not considered sufficient justification for covering the cost of charging phones on behalf of the project.

### Next steps

The next focus for ENCISS is to strengthen public awareness of the project and its data – both in Sierra Leone and in the UK – to seek avenues for using the reports in other fora. And while initial feedback suggests that the reports are leading to positive change in the communities concerned, these outcomes need to be closely monitored. The priority, in the coming months, is for ENCISS to ensure that the reports and responses are duly followed up, in order to ascertain the relationship between the reports and the resulting actions.

However, the overall picture at this stage is that SMS Voices is going from strength to strength. Consequently, ENCISS, Radar and Christian Aid will continue to assess the value of the project and the possibility of extending it or scaling it up beyond September.

## Speaking out: perspectives from the participants

**Claude Sheriff, citizen reporter, Ward 232, Bo:**

'There are a lot of advantages of mobile reporting. First, you learn to condense your messages down to just the most important words. Second, you can send a message to the authorities from wherever you are. And third, through all of this you can get the appropriate action to be taken by your councillor. Now we're sending these messages through SMS, information can be spread quickly from one point to another.'

**Ballay Mansaray, councillor, Ward 160, Koinadugu** (Pictured, middle, with fellow councillors Alice Koroma (left) and Kindy Shaw):

'The project is very good for me as a councillor, because it has created awareness about the issues. It will also help with the ward committee members, because if there is anything they don't mention when they report to me, I know that members of the community will pick it up. With more information, I can discuss these issues with the chairman, with the staff: we will all be more aware of work to be done. And in this way I can work better with the council, for the benefit of Kisonko chiefdom, for the district, and Sierra Leone as a whole.'



## Appendix A: Extract of dialogues, April 21 to end of June

Education	
Report	Response / Closure
Pupils and teachers, learning is not taking place in lengekoro D E C primary school since the beginning of third term because the head teacher is absent from school [1/3]	O THANK YOU FOR YOUR INFORMATION I WILL FINDOUT FR6 THE SMC THANK YOU [2/3]
Councilor since the 8 of may 2014 you reply me about the head Teaber to find out about his absent from school i do not get feedback from you [3/3]	Report Open
There is an N G O named Muwoda they visited our school and inform our headmaster that we should have a six boreholds toilet so the school is responsible for the local materials	Closed by reporter
Health	
Report	Response / Closure
CRS Contractor have start constructing a 12 by 12ft stor in modia for school feeding, from march still awaiting completion, because of negligency. 1/4	The services for crs is on going proceses crs has step 1 step 2 step3 this is the first step 2/4
Not the matter of steps, the materials are their the work is not going on in modia, other communities are completed, why the stop? 3/4	I have consultor the contractor the work continu early nexst month 4/4
During the supply of bed-net, some people find it very difficut to access the health facility, as there is only one health center in four section. 1/4	There is three health center in the four sections you are talking about 2/4
According to my outreach over the week through out the four section that is Sindeh ,Korjeh ,Nyalla and Nyawa, there is only one health center that is Fengehun. 3/4	The heath center at fengehun is meant for three section 4/4
Residents of gbanja town area says more medical and hygiene facilities are needed to avoid killer disease among children and women in d rains.	Report Open
What is the council doing in relation to the distribution of a French Mosquito repelant ( baygon) in sewa section on the 24: 04: 14 1/6	Are you sure council is involved in the process ? 2/6
Council is not involved i know sir but the distribution went on yesterday do some enquiries. 3/6	Who does the distribution ? 4/6
Enquire from one Lamin Feika( driver ) at shellmingo. 5/6	close 6/6

Lake Sonfon have now being use by mining companies/ workes to destroyed our tourism attraction at Diang chiefdom everyday because of gold mining	AS FOR LAKE SONFON GOVERMENT HAS SENT PEOPLE FROM MINISTRY OF TORISIM TO STOP PEOPLE
Our coloniel bridge have been destroyed by mining companies at Badala some months ago because of high Authorities still on their way not to repair the bridge.	I HAVE TOOK THE MATTER TO THE CHIEFDOM AUTHORITIES BUT NO ACTION IR TAKEN AM NOW READY TO TAKE THE MATTER TO COUNCIL I WI£ THEN GET TO YOU
<b>Market</b>	
<b>Report</b>	<b>Response / Closure</b>
THE DRAINAGE SYSTEM AT THE YOGOMAIA MARKET NEEDS TO BE CLEANED TO AVOID FLOODING. 1/4	Roads construction is in progress. We have to give time 4 completion. 2/4
YES WE KNOW BUT LET THEM CLEAR IT AFTER EVERY RAIN SO IT WILL NOT OVERFLOW. 3/4	We have to give them time 4/4
THE YOGOMAIA MARKET SORROUNDING IS VERY BUSHY AND SNAKES ARE NOW BREEDING THERE ACCORDING TO OUR LOCAL RADIO REPORTER TODAY SUNDAY 15TH JUNE, 2014,	I will inspect d area my self & give u feedback
	Most of bushy areas at lagooda are own by people, ie local resident. I have spoken to them & they promise to brush it. [Type CLOSE to end, or continue dialogue]
<b>Gender</b>	
<b>Report</b>	<b>Response / Closure</b>
Recent initiation of young girls under 18 indhicates illegal FGM is on the increase in our community.	Closed by reporter
THERE IS INDISCRIMINATE BEATING OF GIRLS AROUND LAGUNDA AT NIGHT ACCORDING TO A NEARBY TRADER	We have to blame there parents 4 such an act. they are d one's that are leaving there girls child 4 night studies.However laws are in place to abolished this night studies.
there is a unlawful iniciation in kafogo village of twenty two underage children l inuited the head of sowies in the distrist and we went to the village and to the paramount chief and the paramount chief and the paramount chief said he did not have hands and he begging but mammy fatmata sahd if the chief accept she is not going to accept	Closed by reporter

## Appendix B: Technology overview

The hub system, user interfaces and reporter management tools that have been developed for the SMS Voices reporting project are innovative on a number of levels, and have already generated interest from other organisations working in the field, due to the way in which they have addressed the challenges of working to tight budget in low- resource environments.

### About the Hub

The central challenge of the hub system was to manage incoming and outgoing messages from over 50 participants, recording them on a central database and relaying them on to their intended destination. Equally, this had to be done in such a way that the messages would appear to each of the nine participating councillors as if they had been sent by one of the five reporters in their ward, even though all messages originated from a central hub. A step-by-step dialogue process also had to be developed to guide the reporters through the process of sending a report.

All of this had to be achieved with minimum spend on software and hardware, but with a system that would be resilient to the numerous challenges caused by patchy telecoms infrastructure in Sierra Leone.

One part of the system is physically located in Sierra Leone. It uses 5 Android phones with local SIM cards, and runs free software which uploads all SMSs received from our reporters to an online repository. The messages received are then sent into a computer programme that compiles the messages into threads, and sends the appropriate instructions to the reporters at each stage of the way.

A big benefit of this system is that it does not require specialist equipment to run (eg. a GSM modem connected to a dedicated computer in country). This means that it could be easily replicated in a number of different environments for low cost. It has also skirted around the reluctance of SL telecoms companies to directly provision numbers for this project (which would have existed as 'virtual numbers' that could be operated and topped up remotely, without the need for physical handsets).

### User interfaces & data management

The project also involved the creation of four separate user interface systems. These represent the needs of different user groups, and differing levels of privacy regarding the nature of data that it was appropriate to reveal at different access levels.

These interfaces were:

- An interactive map widget, providing top-level data that would be displayed on the ENCISS website and publicly visible.
- A report generator microsite, allowing a user to run tailored queries on live data from the system, to be (displayed in an easily understandable graph format)
- An administrative tool for Radar staff, giving the ability to view and analyse the text of all messages passing (through the Hub, and intervening to close conversations where necessary)
- A database storing the full range of data passing through the Hub for the developer to work with.

### Resilient design

During the project, the in-country hardware has encountered numerous periods of power cuts, telephone network outage, and internet failure. Despite this, there have been only two periods of system outage during the three-month project trial, both of which lasted only a matter of days. In both cases, once reporters had brought the problems to the attention of the Radar team, they were rectified within 24 hours. In both cases, no data whatsoever was lost. Even messages that were sent in to the hub during the time that it was offline were stored by the system, and actioned as soon as it was back online.

Overall, the SMS Voices project has provided low-cost, highly innovative, demonstrably resilient solutions to the challenges of running communications projects in low-resource environments.