Technology-Aided "Real-Time" Feedback Loops in International Philanthropy

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Abstract

Local people are the experts on whether they are being well-served by a development project or organization. This case study illustrates how new technology makes it possible for the people to advise donors and implenters about progress with continuous feedback. We used both traditional and experimental evaluation approaches over a six-month period to reform a Kenyan youth sports organization that was not providing promised services to the athelete's satisfaction.

We found that a crucial first step in priming more beneficiary feedback (by email, the web, and word of mouth) was explicitly telling project beneficiaries we wanted to hear what they thought, and handing out bumper stickers as reminders. We used continuous feedback from beneficiaries to monitor the environment surrounding the project, and to remove the project from GlobalGiving when the community rescinded its endorsement of the organization due to dissatisfaction with its founder. In general, we believe technology-aided feedback loops will enable local organizations and the people, instead of donors, to drive the funding process.

1 | Introduction

Here we present the story of one community-based organization that managed youth sports and education projects in western Kenya, and its struggle to adapt to the needs of the community it served. This organization was supported for several years by a network of individual donors through GlobalGiving[3], an online fundraising marketplace serving hundreds of organizations worldwide. Here GlobalGiving served as a facilitator, delivering information to individuals and placing the funding decisions in the hands of donors.

This story is instructive because the organization boasted a well-meaning leader who helped over 100 members of his community despite limited resources, and won the continuing support of the youth he served. Yet there were underlying signs that the youth were not fully satisfied. When we posed the question, "Should this organization continue to receive donations through GlobalGiving?" the youth, project visitors, a formal evaluator, and the donors all agreed that the it should continue despite the struggles reported on the ground. Instead, all asked that GlobalGiving continue to work with the organization and suggested tangible goals for improvement. This cooperative mindset continued for several months until a breakaway group of youth offered the community new leadership from a new organization. This caused a widespread shift in attitudes against the former leader, causing the original organization to dissolve.

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[3] Global Giving, www.globalgiving.org.

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We consider this story a seminal case because it illustrates that true community building is neither tidy nor predictable, but is nevertheless possible when feedback facilitates a dialogue. Dynamic feedback between clients, implementers, and the donor community brings together the forces for change. The recent spread of new technology, particularly mobile phones and SMS-to-web, now allows villagers to report continuously on project progress, and ultimately to guide implementers. These technology-aided feedback loops will enable practitioners and clients, instead of donors, to drive the funding process.

The narrative that follows is a snapshot of what feedback loops can do when ongoing funding is triggered or withheld through crowd-sourcing, based on the real-time information from gracious or underserved community clients.

2 | Case narrative on feedback loops in Western Kenya

The Context

Over three years, GlobalGiving facilitated $8,019 in online donations from 193 individuals to a youth sports organization working in a sprawling slum in great need. With the highest poverty rate (48%) in Kenya, incomes around $40-50 per month,[4] HIV/AIDS spreading at epidemic levels, and recovering from the deadly 2007-08 post election violence,[5] many youth here have an overwhelming sense of despair.

Within this challenging environment, this organization had been providing opportunities to youth since 2004. Their primary project was a youth soccer club, operated on the pitch of a local school and a community sports stadium. Six days a week, over 150 young boys gathered to practice, morning and afternoon. Occasionally, the team was invited to matches both locally and as far away as Kampala, Uganda. Their modest office proudly displayed pictures from tournaments, visits from dignitaries, and certificates from Kenya's Ministry of Youth. The organization also helped an orphanage for children living with HIV/AIDS and a poor rural school.

Over a fourteen-month period, GlobalGiving facilitated oversight through both a traditional approach, in this case staff visits and a paid professional 3rd-party evaluation, and a more experimental approach involving quarterly self-reports, occasional blog posts from project visitors ("visitor postcards"), impromptu online community feedback, and direct email contact with clients. The following narrative chronicles the findings from each type of project oversight.

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[4] Onim J.F: " Scoping Study for Urban and Peri-Urban Livestock Keepers in Kisumu City, Kenya", June 2002 [*unpublished paper*].
[5] "Scores Dead in Kenya Poll Clashes", *BBC News*, December 31st, 2007, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7165602.stm.

Staff visits[6]

In early March, 2009, Global Giving sent a staff member to western Kenya to conduct a workshop on social media for local organizations. This organization volunteered to coordinate this workshop in Kisumu and successfully carried out this task.

Before the workshop, the staff member visited the organization's headquarters. He discussed the work with the founder and eight youth and gave them bumper stickers that read, "What does your community need? Tell us: GlobalGiving.org/ideas." The staff member emphasized that GlobalGiving wanted to hear directly from the people in the community. No irregularities preceded or prompted this visit, which was part of a series of visits the staff member held with at least five other Kenyan organizations during the trip. The staff member did not uncover any irregularities during the brief visit.

In late March GlobalGiving sent another team of four visitors to Kenya as part of a Capstone program at George Washington University's masters program in International Development. Two met the organization and several youth and conducted a formal survey. Most of the 52 survey questions dealt with quantifying project outputs, but several questions gauged the relationship between organization and the community. The surveyors considered these questions essential:

(1) Asked to the founder or staff: "How do you know that you are listening to the beneficiaries and doing what they want?"

(2) Asked to a staff member: "Why did you choose to work for this organization?"[7]

After testing the survey with 20 projects in Kenya, these two questions provided the best insights into the relationships and the environment surrounding a project, which are two critical inputs to successful projects.

Word-of-mouth feedback

During the surveyors' visit one community member met privately and asked the visitor to forward his complaints about the way the founder was managing the youth sport and education project. She directed him to submit feedback on the globalgiving.org/ideas website (the one printed on the bumper stickers). His April 4th, 2009 web form response read:

> **Q: What is your single greatest need?**
> how to manage helping orphans, persons living with hiv aids, promoting the idea of sporting to my community and also making young men in my community to understand who is god? and what good virtues are needed from them.
>
> **Q: Name one organization that serves you well:**
> "formerly it was [the organization] sporting organization but currently the co-ordinator is evil minded and corrupt."
>
> **Q: How do you know?**

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[6] Both of the authors of this paper visited Kisumu and conducted interviews on the effect of various project assessment approaches.
[7] Acton et. al. *Global Givers Giving Locally: A Fresh Perspective on Accountability*, International Development Capstone Project, George Washington University, May 2009.

> "because formerly as i was one of the footballers and also official members we were being treated with a lot of respect and also we managed to travel to the neighbouring countries for other tournaments after this things over suddenly changed when the co-ordinator was given kshs. 1,000,000 to promote the club but with his greediness he managed to biologically swallow all the amount to himself and also sold all the balls that were given out."[8]

This feedback from one disgruntled individual raised concern. A subsequent petition sent by email eliminated doubts that this person was alone:

> I would like you to know that I am one of the [organization] youths that have been exploited by [the founder] where by we decided to call it quits because many organizations have been sending a lot of money and goods to [the organization] yet the evil minded man is only benefiting himself and his family.

> Moreover myself and others that have opened their eyes have decided to alert you to come and audit all the amounts that you have been sending to the organization. Also, the Korean Voluntary organization sent him some of the team's items yet he decided to swallow everything by himself. To the rebel members I am a trained HIV/AIDS counselor so I and others are voluntarily working at our remote villages.[9]

This petition included 7 other names and was forwarded to Global Giving's contracted evaluator, who was already slated to visit the organization the following month as part of a planned experiment to compare various approaches to gathering information about projects.

Visitor Postcards

GlobalGiving arranges site visits for travelers, locals, and any other interested persons. These visits are designed to verify projects are functioning as described on the website, as well as to produce compelling narratives that will sustain funding for good projects. Visitors submit "postcards," which are brief 3rd party observer reports. Akin to a blog post, the visitor postcard is meant to be an informal and personal testimonial of someone who visited the project. GlobalGiving emails postcards directly to supporters of the project and publishes them on the project page to influence prospective donors. Visitors sent three postcards between March and July of 2009:

On March 17th, Global Giving staff and co-author of this paper Marc Maxson, visited and wrote a postcard. In this excerpt the visitor describes what he saw and how he heard:

> [The organization's] office was one of the larger shacks on a street in the heart of the slums. It had a nice hand-painted sign. A small crowd of eight youths were gathered there, in preparation for my visit. [The founder] understands how Global Giving works. I know because when I talked too fast, he translated into local idioms for me and heads nodded in recognition of the idea. Here and elsewhere, the local Swahili translation for GlobalGiving is "Harambe." As one teenager explains Harambe, "when you have something heavy to lift and you cannot do it yourself, you yell 'harambe' and the people come help you so everyone does it together." Harambe is a village revival fundraising event where the people pool their money to support a common purpose. [the founder] said, "GlobalGiving is Harambe for our sport project on the internet."

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[8] "What Does Your Community Need?" Global Giving, www.globalgiving.org/ideas.
[9] Email correspondence April 24th, 2009.

We handed out bumper stickers that say "What does your community need?" and the site: www.globalgiving.org/ideas. They were a hit. Everyone likes stickers, even if they don't quite understand the website part. We're trying to engage kids in slums like Minyata to tell us (and you) what they need most. I [10]

A few weeks later on April 21st, two members of the Capstone survey team sent a postcard, excerpted below:

Kara:

It was a busy day, spent visiting the office, the staff, and two schools in Kisumu and the surrounding areas. Although [the organization's] main initiative seems to be focused on combining sports and education, it has also worked with women who fled to Kisumu after the post-election violence in 2008. I saw the sadness on their faces and in their words as they described losing husbands and homes in the violence. However, I am not exactly sure what [the organization] is doing for these women…

A few things surprised me during our visit. 1) We were supposed to visit the orphanage that is run by [the organization], but we never got the chance, which surprised me since their main project on GlobalGiving has to do with those orphans. 2) [the founder] asked us for a lot of money throughout the day: to rent an expensive car, to pay for footballs and snacks for the school kids, to buy benches for the schools, to get him a digital camera, to tip the driver, to buy drinks for the football team, and more. By the end of the day, I literally had no money in my pockets, and I left feeling a bit taken advantage of, a feeling I did not have at any of the other organizations we visited. 3) I was surprised by the focus on serving just the Luo tribe and the animosity toward other tribes by the staff.[11]

Christine:

We started off the visit by seeing his office, a one room space open to the street. I met with the volunteers that help [the organization], and heard about how great their soccer team was. The team seemed to be a major focus for the volunteers, and I learned little about what they do for the community…

Throughout the day, [the founder] repeatedly asked me and my partner to purchase things for the soccer team and the children. It was clear that providing for so many beneficiaries weighs heavily on him, especially considering how diverse his constituency is. It's a shame because I do believe that [the organization] is doing good work, but their approach is a turn off. Only hearing about the need, but never about the work being done doesn't encourage support.[12]

One month later Leah Ambwaya, a locally-based professional evaluator contracted by GlobalGiving, visited and wrote an illuminating report that GlobalGiving sent to donors as a postcard on May 14th. She quotes a beneficiary named Mwangi[13] (name changed by interviewee to protect identity). Mwangi stressed the organization's successes at giving youth positive alternatives to drugs and idleness, while also addressing the ways that the organization failed to meet the needs of the community:

We talked to Mwangi a 16 year old orphan who dropped out of school in form four due to lack of school fees. We sought his permission to record this discussion on tape, to which

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[10] "Updates from The Field", Global Giving, March 17th, 2009, available at
http://www.globalgiving.com/projects/youth-sport-in-kenya/updates/
[11] Ibid. April 21st, 2009
[12] ibid.
[13] Mwangi means "wanderer" in Swahili

he consented.

I quote "my name is Mwangi, I started playing for [this organization] in 2008, I play full back. I dropped out of school this year due to lack of school fees, I was in form four, I do not have any hope of going back to school since my two elder brothers are unemployed and can not help at all. I come for practice twice a day on a daily basis (morning and evening).

This project keeps me busy and also keeps me away from getting myself into a lot troubles like doing drugs and other antisocial things that many young people get into due to desperation. I don't even know if I will ever go back to school, the chances are very minimal."

Mwangi continued:

"We don't even go to the office or help out with any work at the office. As much as we have been offered the opportunity to join the team, we also have our own challenges with the club, but we are not given a chance to express ourselves. If you do then you are kicked out of the club. This project can help the youth more, if we can be given some roles to play."

"Does the director listen to you?" I asked.

"You can't dare speak, you will be kicked out." However, Mwangi affirms that some of them had traveled to Tanzania for a tournament some time last year.[14]

When we asked Mwangi and his fellow petitioners whether the organization should continue receiving donations through GlobalGiving, they replied "yes" at that time, but asked for more oversight. This postcard was sent as part of a larger formal evaluation.

Formal Evaluation

The contracted formal evaluator Leah Ambwaya visited and reported her findings to GlobalGiving and project supports on May 5th, 2009. The two-page evaluation report asks the evaluator to rate and comment on the organization in a wide range of categories ranging from governance to financial status to community engagement.

In her visit, Ambwaya found severe problems with the organization. While she reported an "overwhelming potential to serve the youths of Kisumu through sports for social change," her report reported serious governance and financial mismanagement issues. She wrote of "a reluctancy to mention the Board and how it operates," and a general feeling amongst recipients that the founder is "secretary, chairman and board."[15] Further, "there were no financial records whatsoever, and the founder himself could not remember how much money he had received from Global Giving." She recommended that the project incorporate the recipients in the decision making process, and proffer full transparency of all financial records.

Both the full report and narrative summary (visitor postcard) appear on the website. One donor comment on this report captured the nuances of implementing work under the difficult circumstances:

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[14] Ibid. May 14th.
[15] Leah Ambwaya, Contractor Evaluation Report, Global Giving, May 5th, 2009.

I think it's hard to run any organization, but with that said, non-profits need to be clear with the donor community and the recipients about their goals and progress. [This organization] is not clear about how funds are spent and even [the founder's] update reports to GlobalGiving raised red flags with me. There are too many other good projects out there; I will support those.

Volunteer support

Earlier in 2009, the founder of the organization requested help from a conflict resolution Master's Degree program,[16] Partly because of the visibility of this ongoing dialogue on the GlobalGiving website, Tim Hicks (University of Oregon) arranged for two conflict resolution students to intern with the organization in summer, 2009. Hicks visited the organization for nine days and worked with the founder to arrange and document what the student interns would do and what the organization had committed to. The two key areas they planned to address were organizational development, particularly moving towards more transparent financial management, and improved internal communication and conflict resolution. Hicks sent his impressions to donors as a visitor postcard in May of 2009, excerpted here:

> All in all, this is very much a legitimate organization doing good work and worth supporting. Over the next 6 months, I believe it will develop the org management systems that will increase transparency and accountability. I believe that there is tremendous potential for [the organization] to make even more of a difference for orphaned youth, widows, and the community at large."[17]

The interns attempted to work with youth and staff at improving the organization for several months (June to August, 2009). The interns' experience confirmed earlier reports that there was widespread frustration among the youth. They organized meetings to foster understanding and facilitated closer ties between the organization and TYSA[18], another youth sports organization working in the same region. The interns were impressed by the inclusive way TYSA listened to and empowered its youth through sports, which increased the interns' resolve to seek improvement at the organization. Ultimately, the interns were frustrated in their efforts by the lack of commitment from the founder. They decided instead to devote their energy to developing an alternate community youth organization, helping two community leaders in Kisumu create a new organization to parallel the original organization's work in the community. One intern wrote:

> [The founder] says the right things in meetings and then immediately begins to operate on his own terms when he leaves. We also began meeting with many more community members, some of whom were former members. We heard many stories about how poorly he has treated his members and many accusations of thievery. I am not saying I believe all of these stories but it also became clear that the conflict was escalating and that I needed to figure something out… After discussions with [several youth] involved

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[16] Master's Degree Program In Conflict and Dispute Resolution. *http://conflict.uoregon.edu/*
[17] "Updates from The Field", Global Giving, May 21st, 2009, available at http://www.globalgiving.com/projects/youth-sport-in-kenya/updates/.
[18] Trans-nzoia Youth Sports Association

with [the organization] the decision was made that we would start a new organization that would successfully address the problems in Minyatta.[19]

Up until this point, all stakeholders shared the view that organization was bringing more good to the community than would otherwise be possible without it. When asked, "should this organization continue to fundraise on GlobalGiving?" the answer was yes for each visitor and youth affected. However, at the moment when another organization provided youth with a choice between two alternatives, remaining with the organization or joining a new youth-led proffered "Manyatta Youth Resource Center,"", the majority of beneficiaries withdrew support for the parent organization. In the weeks that followed, other community members similarly followed suit. The principal of a local school revoked the old organization's right to use the practice fields, citing the founder's long-standing failure to deliver on promises to provide support for grounds upkeep. With the organization expelled and isolated, the founder ultimately disbanded the organization and left the community altogether after many years of service.

Case summary

This narrative considers one community organization as it struggled to deal with internal challenges over a 6 month period. In March, a Global Giving staff member visited the project and encouraged the beneficiaries to provide informal feedback. In April, two project visitors reported youth being excluded from the decision making process and a lack of transparency in the organization. In May, youth decided to report their concerns directly via an online feedback form and via email as a group petition. Later in May, a formal evaluator visited with staff and beneficiaries and reiterated the prior obserations of casual observers. In June, in response to a request from the organization founder for guideance in conflict management, two interns arrived and held workshops with youth and organization staff. After several months of dialogue with the organization founder and following a visit to a nearby sports program (TYSA) with an inclusive management style, the youth decided to create a splinter organization. This decision was supported by but not orchestrated by the conflict resolution volunteers. The following section explores the lessons learned from this narrative involving both formal evaluation and feedback loop tactics.

3 | Lessons from the case study

Although the long-term impact of creating stronger feedback loops in this community will not be known for years to come, this feedback allowed the events and interventions described here to more accurately reflect the desires of the community served. This narrative illustrates the essential value of a "real-time" feedback loop: sustaining dialogues that continuously draw attention to a project's environment, with an emphasis on the cooperation necessary for positive community impact. Conversely, this narrative underscores the power of feedback to accelerate social change when leadership resists the will of the community it serves. Without a deliberate effort to promote dialogue, the underlying problems in this community might have taken years to resolve and could have erupted in violence, similar to what happened throughout the region just 18 months

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[19] Conflict resolution student intern, email correspondent, July 13th, 2009.

earlier. Moreover, this continuous feedback approach allowed GlobalGiving to pinpoint the moment when all stakeholders' attitudes towards the founder and the organization changed and it was obvious that the community wanted to be served by a different organization. This clarity allowed us to take immediate action, which was to conduct a final informal phone and SMS survey of beneficiaries and community members. We again asked, "Should this organization be removed from GlobalGiving?" Over 40 youth, other community members, and recent interns working with the organization said to remove it. Even a community member working at another funding agency wanted us to remove this organization from GlobalGiving, and cited our feedback efforts as a reason why he too was no longer supporting them, but now favored the new splinter organization. Three eyewitnesses reported the organization's offices in Kisumu were closed, including a neutral community member who had no prior relationship with the organization or its youth. When presented with clear evidence of a change in attitutes from beneficiaries and the community, we did not hesitate to remove this organization.

This example illustrates three ways that the feedback loop approach may be uniquely valuable for the oversight of community development. First, this approach allows more participation through more channels,[20] particularly the most interested parties. Second, this approach generates signals that force others to take action to resolve the underlying problems faster. Seeing negative visitor feedback appear on a webpage just days after a visit caused the founder much consternation[21], leading to immediate action that was constructive, at first. Third, *direct* feedback circumvents the principal/agent problem, where funders (principal) have trouble communicating with recipients because of their dependence on implementers and evaluators (agents).

This case also demonstrates how giving members a voice prevents problems from escalating into violence, analogous to how stopping minor crimes has been shown to prevent major crimes[22]. Additional interviews revealed that an incident involving a trip to Kampala provided the impetus for youth speaking out through the online form and petition. At the last minute, one group of players had been removed from a team trip for reasons that were never conveyed to them. These youth became incredibly angry, and according to an assistant coach, they had threatened to burn down the founder's house in retaliation[23] and quit the organization. Instead, the coach urged them to react constructively, and they eventually decided to take their concerns to GlobalGiving via the online form and petition.[24] As one of the youth stated: "the email was sent because it was the only way to change [the founder] and still take parting the organization that we like very much."[25] Interviews also reveal a natural urge amongst recipients to take part in the process of improving their organizations. As one youth said, "We would like to get in

[20] Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics in a New Age,* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2004).

[21] Source: frequent emails to GG staff requesting help and asking that negative comments be removed.

[22] George Kelling and Catherine Coles. *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities*, (New York, Free Press, 1997).

[23] Much of Kenya's recent election violence involved retaliatory house burning, and likely influenced the youth.

[24] Source: interview of two youth in Kisumu, Kenya, June 15th, 2009. Names suppressed.

[25] Iinterview with a third participant held at the organization's office, Kisumu, Kenya, June 16th, 2009.

contact with the individual donors. If we could get their contacts, youth could be free to email or text them and we can see how we can build the organization."[26]

Providing an SMS-based feedback system or passing out a bumper stickers with the website address, and subsidizing the small (yet significant) amount of money required to visit an Internet café are great investments compared to the hourly wage of professional evaluators. And even in the best cases, formal evaluations relay information about community needs through intermediaries. Feedback tools provide evaluators with more leads for follow-up interviews. Despite the insightful commentary from the professional evaluator in this case, her perception was necessarily shaped through a few choice interviews; the bulk of the community was excluded from shaping her perception. Similarly, power relationships impair the ability of staff to gather direct feedback, as evidenced by the absence of warning flags in the postcard sent by the first staff member to visit the organization. A better approach is to educate communities on how to submit real-time feedback through tools that protect individuals from retribution.

As a final reflection on feedback loops, the discrepancy between the organization's outward prosperity and the poor relationship it had with the youth it aimed to serve highlights a serious limitation to the formal evaluation. This organization had been operating for over 5 years, attracted regional and international funding from many sources, and claimed to have 2 staff, 22 volunteers, and 640 members.[27] The standard action for most funders upon recognizing irregularities would be to abandon the organization and its beneficiaries, because the risks outweigh the potential impact. Our formal evaluation stressed low community involvement as a critical problem, but the evaluation process could not fix this problem. In contrast, monitoring through a continuous feedback loop forces stakeholders to join together in finding a workable solution, because the people raising concerns are also the ones most likely to improve the environment. The feedback loop approach facilitates solutions, rather than merely identifying problems.

4 | Elements and Tools of Feedback Loops

So what, in particular, separates the feedback-centered distributed decision-making process from traditional, formal evaluations? We note three elements: crowd-sourcing communications, the evaluation framework, and new technology.

Crowd-sourcing

Whereas the unit of information in the formal evaluation is one complete self-contained report, feedback loops generate information fragments that must be filtered and aggregated, a task best performed through crowd-sourcing both by advocates and project beneficiaries.

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[26] Interview with a fourth participant held at the organization's office, Kisumu, Kenya, June 16th, 2009.
[27] Acton et. al. (source of this data was a formal survey)

Similar to the dynamics of social media, technology-aided feedback loops put the audience is in control of the messages. Each member is encouraged to consume content from others, but also to adopt and alter the message as it spreads through informal networks. Conversations are the unit of communication, not monologues. The efficiency of the message is dictated by the tendency of each person to pass it on to friends. Therefore the messages must be interesting, rewarding, and/or important. This collaborative filtering of project and beneficiary information disseminates the most important information to the widest audience automatically.

Evaluation framework

While the traditional evaluation relies mostly on human visits and report writing, information in feedback loops is predominatly relayed through mobile phones and the Internet in a rapid-fire, conversational manner that triggers immediate responses. For messages from the community to bubble up and influence the direction of projects, mechanisms for evaluation must also follow the guidelines of social media to work. Whereas most formal evaluation frameworks focus on quantifying results and predicting future *impact*, a "continuous feedback dynamics" approach tries to create an enabling *environment*. Conversations surrounding the project provide the raw material for leaders to draw insights on how better to achieve goals, from the community's perspective. If the *environment* surrounding a community project is fraught with conflict, the project itself will not succeed and persist. Likewise, the absence of beneficiary feedback can signify a lack of community involvement. Thus sustaining and monitoring conversations among stakeholders surrounding the project can be an effective means of achieving higher-Impact results.

Technology

Until recently, garnering informal feedback from participants in projects halfway across the world was simply unfeasible. With the rise of web and mobile networks over the last decade, however, real-time feedback and meaningful communication between donors and recipients is now possible. Yochai Benker describes this new reality as the "networked public sphere,"[28] an information environment characterized by many-to-many communication (instead of just one-to-many or one-to-one) at near-zero cost. Unlike the industrialized world, the networked public sphere in the developing world exists primarily through mobile phones.[29] The following technologies are essential for enabling feedback from communities:

SMS-based Social Network

The vanguard of these systems is currently FrontlineSMS, a service that allows organizations to send one-to-many and many-to-many text messages within a region.

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[28]Yochai Benkler, Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom (New Haven: Yale, 2006).
[29] A sub-field of communications works on 'digital inclusion,' how technology can be designed to meet the needs of people in the developing world. See, for example, "Beth Kolko and Design for Digital Inclusion, *My Heart's In Accra*, June 16th, 2009, available at http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2009/06/16/beth-kolko-and-design-for-digital-inclusion/.

Only one laptop is required, so long as group members have a mobile signal. Given that an estimated 4 billion people have cell phones in 2009[30], the reach of SMS-based social networks likely covers the majority of villages on Earth (assuming many people still without mobile phones have access through a friend or relative).

This tool has been used by dozens of NGO leaders, clinics and political activists throughout the developing world to reach their staff or constituencies. Specifically, Zimbabwean's report human rights abuses, Indonesian commodity markets send prices to farmers, and Nigerian election monitors reported election irregularities. Messages can be aggregated for surveys or forwarded to websites (SMS-to-web feature)

Other networks with more functionality are quickly becoming available throughout the developing world. The most prominent of these networks is MXit[31], a South African mobile social network with over 14 million users[32] that allows profile building, friending and other functionality. In Uganda, a product called status.ug[33] is enabling users without smart phones to update global networks like Facebook via SMS, and take part in a mobile marketplace. In each of these instances, organizations are creating feedback loops that allow them to report information more quickly, catch problems before they escalate, and often encourage members to take an active role in their organization.

Mobile Money

While social networks enable information to be shared in feedback loops, mobile money services will be necessary to reimburse village-level "micro-evaluators" and for promoting the more widespread adoption of feedback tools. Increasingly throughout the developing world, network providers are launching mobile money transfer services that allow users to deposit money with agents anywhere in the country, and then send money to friends and family via mobile phone. The most well known of these services, mPesa, a service of Kenyan network provider Safaricom, has over five million users[34] and transferred over $1 billion in 2008. The most popular use is to send money from the commercial centers to families in villages. Increasingly, these services are being used to pay for services and for employee wages.

6 | Conclusion

Continuous feedback loops are very powerful, as we have seen in this case of one youth sports and education organization in Western Kenya, that transformed into a different organization under new leadership. Further research is needed to expand feedback loops on a wider scale. The particular flavor of participatory feedback presented in this case by GlobalGiving offers wider possibilities not just for mitigating financial risks, but

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[30] "Measuring the Information Society 2009: The ICT Development Index," *International Telecommunications Union* (Geneva, ITU: 2009).

[31] http://www.mxit.com.

[32] MXit Users Exceed 14 Million, *IT News Africa*, July 14, 2009, available at http://www.itnewsafrica.com/?p=2881.

[33] http://www.status.ug.

[34] Safaricom's M-Pesa Wins Global Service Award, , *IT News Africa*, February 19th, 2009, avable at http://www.itnewsafrica.com/?p=2263.

ultimately for improving the *environment* surrounding project implementation. Poor communications between implementers and the communities they serve can lead to wasted resources (in mild cases) or the threat of outright violence (in serious cases), and can dramatically undermine the results of the project. Moving towards a system that emphasizes feedback and communication allows the community and the organization to work together and move in new directions. The upheaval that results from dialogue could be a necessary step for the community to move forward, causing new institutions continuously emerge. Social change is neither tidy nor linear, and thus we are forced to consider more flexible evaluation designs.