

Study shows cellphones help build resilience during conflicts

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Mobile phone technology was used by Tulane researchers to track Somalians' responses to drought, famine and other hardships. (Photo from the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine)□

A cellphone can provide a lifeline during an emergency, but it can also help build resilience, according to findings by two Tulane University associate research professors.

Principal investigator Nathan Morrow from Tulane Law School's Payson Graduate Program in Global Development and Nancy Mock from the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine received three grants to serve as a learning partner for a project that explores resilience building in Somalia.

That country has had an ongoing drought and famine and intermittent conflicts and security issues over the past 25 years. Not much was known about how people in such conditions foster resilience.

Tulane University

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Nathan Morrow

“The programmers and academics really thought you can’t do resilience-type programming when there’s an active conflict going on,” Morrow said in a podcast. “There were a lot of questions about whether or not resilience could be done in these settings. There was basic learning here, basic research, basic evidence that had to be collected.”

Somalia has high rate of cellphone access, so Tulane's front line community-based partners from CARE International conducted phone surveys. The callers gathered real-time household and community information—tracking trends such as migration, animal deaths, illnesses and community projects—and shared information like savings clubs that financed village improvements and even helped other communities in need.

“The greatest learning is how fast savings can add up from savings groups even in difficult times. Social pressure to save money really helps people build assets. Empowerment and some resources from savings together can make real change in communities and build their resilience,” Morrow said.

The project was a finalist in USAID’s CLA Case Competition. USAid is now using Morrow’s model across Somalia. ([Listen to USAID’s podcast.](#))

“Tulane is very much seen as a leader in international resilience-building project learning,” Morrow added.

The project was a cooperative agreement between the U.S. State Department, the Office of Food for Peace and the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. Tulane’s partners were CARE, World Vision International and Catholic Relief Services.

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