

One of the most exciting aspects in recent developments is the breakthrough in free, robust and multi-purpose mobile applications for development projects. A laptop and a mobile phone are enough to connect and coordinate geographical dispersed teams or to collect information nationwide. This, thanks to innovative people from the humanitarian and health sector, has paved the way to exploit new potentials for mobile collaboration.

Back at the [web2fordev conference](#) , the main topics evolved around certain types of tools and different social media experiments. The fast dynamic of the web has led to a wave of unprecedented open source tools for the development sector. At the same time we are in the midst of a technological revolution using mobile phones as multi-purpose tools. The big change is that applications can be quite easily set up and managed. For example, you can easily start an [SMS campaign](#) from your laptop and reach all those people who do not have Internet access, but do have a mobile phone.

One such popular and flexible tool is [FrontlineSMS](#) which has great potential in the following development sectors:

- Human rights monitoring
- Disaster relief coordination
- Natural resource management
- Election monitoring
- Emergency alerts
- Mobilising task forces
- Field data collection
- Conducting public surveys
- Health care info requests
- Agricultural price updates
- Organizing protests
- Mobile education programs
- Coordinating fundraising efforts
- Providing weather updates

The options for implementation are virtually unlimited. The big difference with earlier developments is that software is written in a more flexible way in open source and open to changes made by the [community](#) . For example “ [FrontlineSMS](#) is free open source software that turns a laptop and a mobile phone into a central communications hub. Once installed, the program enables users to send and receive text messages with large groups of people through mobile phones.”

There is certainly a limit: only 160 characters per SMS are permitted. But check out how FrontlineSMS helped hospitals in rural Malawi to connect with [mobile health workers](#) and how they saved resources with the mobile application.

Another interesting initiative around mobile applications is the recently started [Open Mobile Consortium](#),

where “members are collaboratively developing interoperable open source mobile solutions for social development”. Check out the list of technologies, which are part of the initiative:

CommCare - Mobile Support for Community Health Workers

- Geochat - Mobile Field Communications And Situational Awareness
- JavaRosa - Open Rosa Consortium
- Mesh4X - Seamless Information Sharing Across Devices and Platforms
- Mobilisr - Enterprise Open Source Mobile Messaging
- Open Data Kit - Tools for Data Collection, Aggregation, and Visualization
- Rapid Android - Data and Logistics SMS Server for Android
- RapidSMS - Data collection, Logistics, and Communication with SMS
- Ushahidi: Crowdsourcing Crisis Information

Check details for the different projects at the Open Mobile Consortium [website](#) .

Some efforts are being made to visualize mobile collected data and to offer other tools, such as mobile campaigns or projects on the move. In one example, [Rapid Android](#) lets you initiate a project right from your smartphone. “Rapid Android allows users to use the Android phone as a mini-server, in addition to using it as an SMS client, allowing users in the field to enter data, to create surveys, and rapidly analyze data in the field.”

Another nice approach is to connect such mobile activities with the Internet to share them with a larger audience, or to analyze them in more depth. In a recent project by the web2fordev conference participants, Development Seed developed [SlingshotSMS](#) , data can be sent from the field via SMS, and then bundled on a website (

[Drupal](#)

) for analysis. Thanks “to SMS relaying and parsing, data collectors in the field - with no immediate access to the internet - can send structured data to a secure site where folks back in headquarters or even spread around the world can see and aggregate view of the data”.

In my opinion, the great win of most of the tools, particularly FrontlineSMS, is that they do not need a big technical team and can easily be used for different purposes and in different contexts. Testing and experimenting is the key to making these tools work because they can fail as

[Neal Lesh explains](#)

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