## Case Study
# Talk to Loop

Talk to Loop[1], or "Loop", is a digital platform that enables communities to remotely and safely provide feedback on the humanitarian and public services they receive and report abuse of various kinds. Users can select from a range of channels based on their preferences, including a low-data website, WhatsApp, Facebook and voice calls.

In each country of operation, Loop works through a network of local organisations that recognise the long-term value of the platform. Because local groups determine the direction of the platform, how it integrates into programming varies from country to country. As long as Loop's core principles of transparency and user-initiated feedback are maintained, the steering group can shape it to be useful in their local context.

As of early 2024, more than 800 organisations around the world, primarily humanitarian and development organisations and some government institutions, were using Loop to receive and respond to community feedback. Importantly, in every context where it is in use, Loop operates fully independent of partners.

In Zambia, for instance, the focus has been on holding public institutions to account in a context where one of Loop's civil society partners told us trust in government authorities is low. This partner values the option that Loop gives people who have experienced sexual abuse to report it without fear, and the fact that the Loop team follows up on behalf of those who report.

> "They reach out to social services, to the police, and will be on their case until something happens."
>
> **– Civil society partner of Loop, Zambia**

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1    Note: In February 2024 Talk to Loop announced that they were putting the platform into 'hibernation' due to funding shortages. See: Talk to Loop (February 16th 2024) Loop enters hibernation amid pressing challenges.

## Aims and intended users

Loop aims to contribute to *"a new era of accountability in the humanitarian and international development sectors"*. Openness is a key concern: individuals are free to initiate feedback on whatever they wish, whenever they wish and their comments are made public if they choose. Loop follows up with the aid provider or institution concerned, from which it remains independent. It "loops" back to the individual in their language, in close to real time, and reports publicly in aggregate on the reports received and the action taken.

The intended users are community members, humanitarian organisations, governments and anyone else with an interest in accountability. Feedback becomes a collective resource: anyone can see it and use it to hold the powerful to account:

> "The whole point is that anybody can access feedback. It's not something that is extracted and owned by those who have power and money, but it's a collective resource that local chiefs can access the feedback, somebody reporting can access the feedback that others are providing, to see if it's […] only me that's having trouble with these particular issues, or have other people asked that before and already have answers? […] So the more languages […], the fewer barriers there are to people engaging as a network of actors to solve complex problems."
>
> **– Alex Ross, Founder, Talk to Loop**

## Geography and languages

As of early 2024, Loop operated in 15 languages across Indonesia, the Philippines, Poland, Somalia, Ukraine and Zambia. Arabic, English, French and Spanish are available mainly for the staff of humanitarian organisations. A set of languages identified as relevant for communities and organisations in each country are also available:

— **Indonesia:** Bahasa Indonesia

— **Philippines:** Cebuano, English, Tagalog

— **Somalia:** Mahaatiri and Maay variants of Somali

— **Ukraine regional response:** English, Polish, Ukrainian

— **Zambia:** Bemba, English, Lozi, Nyanja, Tonga

# Accessibility for marginalised language speakers

Language is *"at the heart of what we're doing to try to increase accessibility"* because in all the countries currently served, except Indonesia, communities report that language barriers prevent them from accessing existing feedback mechanisms.

Which channels and languages Loop includes is initially determined by a local host organisation and steering committee of national and international organisations. New languages are then added in response to community consultation.

> "There's always an assumption of fewer languages, of fewer input channels needed, and as you start working and reaching the edges of society or those who are most marginalised, then we add on additional channels and we add on additional languages."
>
> **– Alex Ross, Founder, Talk to Loop**

The initial request is typically for dominant or official languages. When Loop was piloted in the Philippines, they started with English and Tagalog, but then found that communities in Mindanao could not communicate in those languages and added Cebuano. Other languages may be added to reach marginalised Muslim communities.

Even if someone speaks a dominant or official language, Loop's data indicates that they will typically switch to their first language for anything sensitive.

> "If they're saying something like, 'Thank you for the training,' they're quite comfortable to say that in their second language. But if they're saying 'I have been raped by my neighbour and I'm scared to return home,' they're not comfortable saying that in their second language. They need to be able to speak those nuances and that really sensitive personal information in their natural language."
>
> **– Alex Ross, Founder, Talk to Loop**

## For Ukrainians in Poland, the choice of language is linked to trust

In the Ukraine response, the situation was different. Community members initially wanted only Ukrainian to be used on the platform and, in Poland, Polish. Ukrainians who had fled the war saw Russian as the language of the enemy and said they would not feel they could trust Loop if the platform was in Russian. Privately, however, Ukrainians whose first language was Russian would leave feedback in that language, and the bilingual moderator responded. After a year, with Loop enjoying increased trust among Ukrainians, feelings changed. User consultations found that people were less concerned about the issue and would be happy to have the public platform in Russian and Ukrainian to expand access.
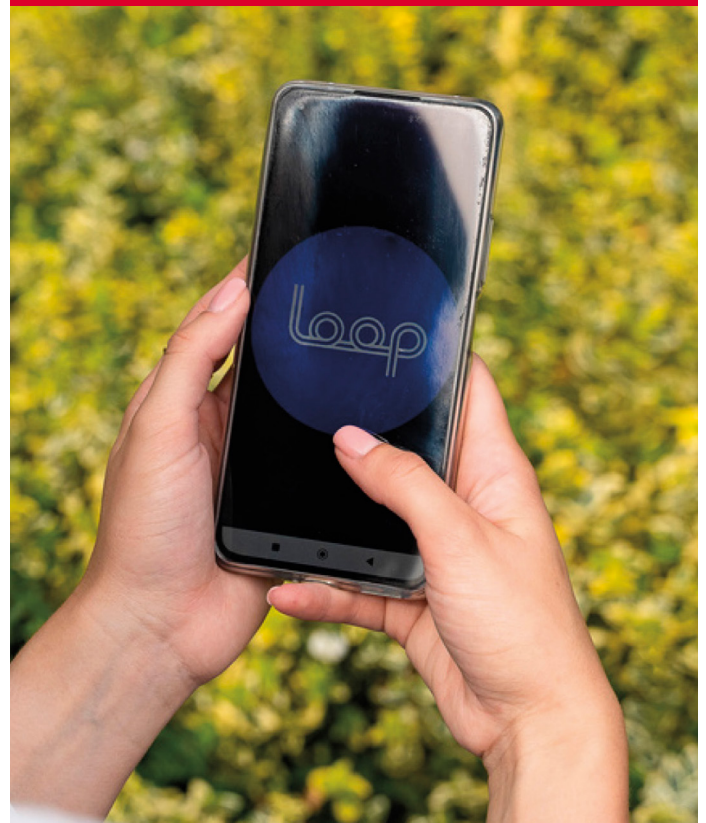
# Use and potential of language technology

Loop takes a pragmatic approach to language technology. Despite the initially poor quality of marginalised language outputs, Loop uses machine learning to save moderator time. The team in Zambia tested written translations of platform content, such as instructions for making a report, with Nyanja and Bemba speakers. However, differences in dialect within the primarily oral languages were too great. Loop also tracks how many users read static content in each language to see which languages people will use to read written content. Data so far shows that "read to me" functions for written content are largely unused because they require smartphones, and people with a smartphone are more likely to be literate in the national language.[2]

The management of feedback reports is a labour-intensive, multilingual process. Each voice message received is transcribed and then translated into all languages used in that context. In Zambia, there will be five written language versions of any report received. The message can then be relayed to any organisation mentioned in their preferred language and, if posted on the website, can be read in any platform language. All follow-up with the author of the message is translated into their preferred language.

Automated transcription is generally poor for Loop's languages, except English, so moderators either manually transcribe or correct automated transcriptions. The text is then ready for machine translation where available, or human translation where not. Multilingual callers will often switch between languages during a call, and moderators must then adjust the transcript so the translation engine can work from a fully monolingual text. Loop staff in the Philippines estimate it takes two to three times longer to process a report made in a mix of languages. Machine translation outputs also need correcting; for speed, only the translations into the author's original language and English are checked. However, the quality has improved over time as corrected translations are fed back into Loop's language provider's proprietary translation memory. As a result, Loop estimates that even with the need for correction, language technology saves about 25% of a moderator's time.

Loop continuously collects, transcribes and translates a huge amount of marginalised language voice data. They see value in sharing this appropriately to support language technology development for these languages. This could yield further efficiencies for Loop and wider benefits for those language communities. However, they currently lack the internal resources and expertise to manage the additional processes this would entail, including updating informed consent wording in line with ethical and legal standards; anonymising and curating voice data and associated transcripts and translations; and uploading to a platform such as Hugging Face.

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2    Ross, A. (2021). "Learning Series 1: What we learnt about language". Talk to Loop (blog).

# Integration of digital technology in programming

In Zambia, Loop is helping provide accountability for abuse and institutional failure to either prevent or punish it, which makes data protection and confidentiality vitally important. Users will often not share their personal information or consent to their reports being published. Loop's team of specialised case managers process reports on a separate channel for privacy. Users in Somalia similarly choose not to share their personal information when reporting abuse or misconduct, for fear of reprisals. Users feel more comfortable sharing information when requesting assistance. In contrast, in the Philippines, users are generally confident navigating social media platforms and comfortable having their information in the public domain.

In other contexts, the focus is on the services and conduct of humanitarian organisations specifically. Loop and its partner organisations publicise the existence, independence, safety and use of the platform in the languages of communities, for instance, through radio broadcasts and posters. Data shows that reporting peaks in response.

In Somalia, one civil society member described the arrival of Loop as groundbreaking for marginalised communities, which had previously found feedback mechanisms dysfunctional or corrupt. As most humanitarian communication was in the dominant dialect of Somali, other language communities felt that *"The staff of INGOs […] are not from minority and marginalised communities. So they aren't even interested in whether these people get the information or not."* In contrast, Loop shared information on its feedback tool *"using the same accent and the same language that they speak and very clear and understandable"* and responded in minority languages to reports received.

The technology has also been adapted to the needs of user communities in different contexts. In all Loop countries except Somalia and Zambia, users must leave feedback in writing – by free SMS, on a low-data website, Facebook or commonly used messaging apps like WhatsApp or Telegram. In Somalia, where literacy levels, trust in institutions and network reliability are all low after decades of conflict, Loop launched a patent-pending integrated voice response and reply (IVRR) system. Users call free of charge and receive an automatic call-back that goes through when the signal returns or the phone is recharged or turned on again. This reliability promotes trust as does the recording of the original report, which for transparency is sent back to the caller who has the opportunity to request further contact.

The response to IVRR in Somalia has been so positive that other country teams are now looking to adopt it. At the time of writing, it had launched in Zambia and was being set up in the Philippines.

> "The most remote community, the most marginalised, those who have had less access to education, less access to the internet: they're the ones who want to use voice, and you've got them in every country. [That] is what the local communities are telling us."
>
> **– Alex Ross, Founder, Talk to Loop**

# Challenges, solutions and ways forward

Communicating in the languages, formats and channels that communities are most comfortable with is central to Loop's model, but demands significant investment. Loop is using language technology to enable it to scale and hopes that artificial intelligence (AI) makes further automation possible so that scaling can continue in a financially sustainable way.

# What's next?

In the event that the 'hibernation' of Talk to Loop announced in February 2024 is temporary, the following are among their plans for the future:

— Loop is continuing to expand the range of languages on the platform. The provision of oral feedback remains the default in all contexts, where funding and partnerships allow.

— The team plans to contribute, where possible, to collective efforts to develop automated transcription and translation capacity for more marginalised languages. They see this as key to ensuring the provision of multilingual voice communication across the humanitarian sector.

— Loop plans to expand the range of voice channels supported to include voice notes and read-to-me functionality, complementing (not replacing) the face-to-face communication that will always be needed.



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This case study is part of wider research done by the GSMA and CLEAR Global about the state of inclusion and exclusion for marginalised language speakers in digital humanitarian services.

⟶ **Read the full report here.**