

U-Report: Revolutionary Technology for Development (T4D) application helps UNICEF Uganda undertake Level 3 Monitoring



Kampala, 13 March 2012 – U-report, a new communications technology developed by UNICEF Uganda and launched in May 2011, is revolutionizing social mobilization, monitoring and response efforts to address human rights issues throughout the country. In doing so, it is also equipping legions of mobile phone users with the tools to establish and enforce new standards of transparency and accountability in development programming and the delivery of services.

Simply by sending the text message, “join,” to a toll-free number and submitting a few personal details, anyone with a mobile phone can become a local volunteer “U-reporter” and share their observations, opinions and ideas on a wide range of development issues. In less than a year’s time, the population of U-reporters today stands at over 89,000, with 400-500 joining the network daily.

UNICEF Uganda’s U-report team and a core group of nine NGOs and faith-based organizations collaborate on the effort. They meet regularly to determine timely, important issues to discuss with Uganda’s youth, who make up the majority of the vast and growing network of U-reporters throughout the country. Among the topics covered have been female genital mutilation (FGM), disease outbreaks, water availability, early marriage, education, health, inflation, and others.

A “crowd-sourced” solution

U-report is a mobile phone-based software application developed by UNICEF. It uses the free, open-source RapidSMS (www.rapidsms.org) platform, created and maintained by an online community of volunteer programmers, in which UNICEF plays a prominent role.

The RapidSMS platform is technically versatile. It allows the creation of a wide variety of mobile phone-based programs, including MobileVRS (Mobile Vital Records Systems), another UNICEF application which is being used to record birth registration in Uganda.

Once a topic is decided, the UNICEF technical team sends a question via SMS-based text to the U-reporters who can respond either with a simple menu-based reply or separately with personal messages. The UNICEF team then analyses and interprets the response information, shares the results and often follows up by sending additional questions and suggestions to the network.

Advancing equity by empowering communities

“U-report is gaining popularity because it has given Ugandans the ability to inform other Ugandans and to take action,” explains UNICEF Senior Project Manager James Powell, who leads the U-report initiative. “And for us at

UNICEF, because the system is registration based, we can ask questions about issues throughout the country and get answers right away - by district, by gender, by age - and that helps us know where to concentrate our limited response resources and how best to advise our government and aid partners.”

UNICEF Uganda Representative Sharad Sapra envisioned and embraced U-report’s capabilities early on. “U-report is a game-changing application,” he states, “not only for Uganda, or for UNICEF, but for improving all development agencies’ and NGOs’ ability to assess progress in processes aimed at achieving various development indicators. For UNICEF, it enables us to harness community information for Level 3 monitoring (the new Monitoring Results for Equity System, or MoRES), so we can judge the effectiveness of our programs in meeting identified needs. It also engages our aid beneficiaries in monitoring programme progress. U-report offers a cost-effective, easy-to-implement means of assuring accountability by tapping community knowledge to learn the local and personal impact of policy and development schemes, health interventions and outbreaks. It is a “killer app” for communication toward achieving equitable outcomes for children and their families.”

To that end, U-report has recently been instrumental in supporting efforts to address the outbreak of a mysterious epilepsy-related illness that has come to be known as “nodding disease,” with over 3000 reported cases to date. During its routine feedback analysis process, UNICEF began noting an increasing number of unsolicited messages from U-reporters in northern districts of the country who described a growing epidemic among children 5 - 15 years old, whose symptoms included catatonic staring, malnourishment from cessation of feeding, and head drooping, or “nodding.”

U-reporters: “speechless” enthusiasm

“am just speechless coz it has given us a chance judge our opinions with others whom we aint know,matters of high value.to sum it up it has b'com our union of xpresion”.

“That is wonderful! Ureport sh'd be expanded to cover every corner of Uganda! No stone sh'd be left unturned! Bravo!”

“Ureport has given the youth a chance to express there ideas. This is important because the youth are the future of tomorrow”.

As fear and panic were beginning to take hold of communities, UNICEF was able to dispatch information to increase awareness and for mobilization efforts in partnership with the Ministry of Health and WHO. In addition, the U-report team developed and implemented a four-stage U-report communications and mobilization plan, which informed affected communities of government and health agency awareness, the availability of treatment and likelihood of recovery, clarification of the symptoms and instructions for treatment. In addition, U-report was able to gather information on whether treatment was available in local health facilities as intended, thereby serving as a transparency and accountability monitoring mechanism.

It also recently helped detect and address an outbreak of typhoid in the north, and it holds significant promise for monitoring and response efforts across the broad array of not just health response initiatives, but also education and child protections efforts.

Information access, even in the most remote areas

Among the most important factors in U-report’s success as a community sensitization tool is its depth of penetration. Its popularity stems directly from the immediate, gratifying sense of empowerment U-reporters feel and express (see sidebar – “U-reporters: ‘speechless’ enthusiasm”). With a growing user base of over 89,000 U-reporters, coverage is almost triple that of Uganda’s leading national newspaper, which has daily sales circulation of approximately 33,000.



As a result, the widespread use of U-report has won increasing interest from Uganda’s government officials and media, resulting in more engagement in dialogue by members of parliament on a variety of topics. Among the most noteworthy of the participants is the Commissioner of Uganda’s Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Kyateka Mondo, who publishes a weekly newspaper column called “Mondo’s Message,” in which he responds to selected questions from U-reporters. In his column he spotlights key social issues and provides guidance. Clearly, as U-report grows in use, it is quickly becoming a powerful monitoring tool for government to inform its decisions, on the one hand, and a catalyst for more responsible and responsive governance on the other.

UNICEF Uganda anticipates a bright future for U-report, both in Uganda and in other countries that want to adopt the technology to advance development progress. Among the steps being taken to increase adoption of the technology in Uganda is the creation of non-English language versions of the app, first in Luo, a language spoken in northern Uganda, and then in Karimojong, a language spoken in the north east region. In addition, UNICEF is working with telecommunication companies, to equip telephone booths with U-report service for use by U-reporters who do not possess or have access to a mobile phone. UNICEF has found that in these cases, the lack of mobile phones in a community can often be beneficial to the communications process because a U-reporter in a remote area often represents the views of her or his community, which has discussed the issue before expressing an opinion.

For more information, visit the [U-report website](#) or [contact James Powell](#), U-report Senior Project Manager, directly.