Communication for Development: Responding to Ebola in Liberia

unicef

Innovation in the context of the EVD response in Liberia

Background

In March 2014, Liberia began facing an unprecedented EVD outbreak that lasted for more than one year, affecting 10,048 people, claiming the lives of 4,421, and leaving 4,345 orphaned children. As part of its social mobilization strategy roll-out, UNICEF integrated an "innovation" component.

On November 3rd 2014, UNICEF launched a text-message based interactive social media platform, U-Report, to give a voice to youth to access and provide information about Ebola. The initiative equipped mobile phone users with the tools to establish new standards of transparency and accountability in development programming and services, using simple text messages. A few months after the launch, U-Report caught on quickly and in June 2015, almost 51,000[1] U-reporters are feeding live information from their communities. U-report is one of the applications using Rapid-Pro, an open-source software platform.

As a user-centered social monitoring tool designed to strengthen community-led development and citizen engagement, U-report allows citizens to provide feedback through a forum to amplify their voices, send alerts to key stakeholders about issues their constituents are facing, so they are empowered to work for change and improvements in their localities themselves.[2]

How Did It Work?

"Taking real-time monitoring and response efforts to the next level." Lee Kironget, Innovations Lead, UNICEF Liberia

> **Guide to sending out messages:**
> - Comprehension
> - Acceptance
> - Involvement
> - Call to arms

Once the platform set-up, by sending the text message, 'join,' to a toll-free number and submitting a few personal details, anyone with a mobile phone[3] could become a 'U-reporter'. In Liberia, the feedback is being used to enhance and reposition some of UNICEF's interventions and messages. There is a steering committee mostly composed of youth whose role is to identify weekly key topics to address with U-Reporters. U-reporters are polled and respond with a simple menu-based reply. The cost of the SMS is fully handled by UNICEF through some agreements with the three major local cell phone companies in Liberia. For an average of 500,000 to 1,000,000 SMS sent per month, the unit cost is $0.020.

When U-Report was launched and the first reporters signed up, the weekly polls were focused on Ebola: knowledge and attitudes about safe burial in communities, perception about survivors, knowledge and beliefs and later on perception about school reopening and other issues.

In November 2014, UNICEF partnered with a local organization present in all 15 counties in Liberia through youth networks, FLY (Federation of Liberian Youth), to help recruit U-reporters. Recruitment was done through social mobilizers, targeted campaigning, mobile vans, town hall meetings, and talks in churches, schools and mosques in addition to radio recruitment, radio spots and call-in radio shows through 21 radios nationwide.

In collaboration with the UNICEF C4D team, U-Report expanded recruitment beyond just youth (religious leaders, women, teachers), hence, involving all layers of the community.

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[1] This number grows on a daily basis: www.liberia.ureport.in

[2] https://www.innovateforchildren.org/case-studies/ureport-community-empowerment-rapidsms-uganda

[3] The application does not require a smart phone

U-Report and the C4D strategy

U-Report was complementary to a broader C4D strategy and was organized around 4 key objectives:

- Designing better interventions: Data compiled from polls was used to develop better catered activities such as the extensive training of religious leaders and village chiefs.

> *"Giving a voice to the people who usually do not have one: the youth."*
>
> - Rania Elessawi, C4D Section Chief, UNICEF Liberia

- Monitoring of activities: In partnership with the Ministry of Education, as the schools were re-opening, the U-Report platform allowed the teachers to monitor the distribution and readiness of hand-washing supplies, IPC kits, and even report on the number of students enrolled. This provided an indication of schools adhering to the safe reopening protocols.

- Tracking rumors: Throughout the EVD response, UNICEF addressed community resistance by monitoring rumors through its networks of community workers and partners. Later in the crisis, a rumor bank was set up in partnership with Internews, using the Rapid-Pro platform, as a means of verification to the existing monitoring system in place. This helped validate UNICEF's implementation methodology.

- Empowering audiences: U-Report provided a platform for community dialogue while empowering members.

UNICEF built the capacity of the steering committee members on Ebola related issues as well as other issues of interest to them.

Advantages and Way Forward

- **Low implementing costs**: Joining U-Report is low cost and does not require any training[4].

- **Transition**: With the EVD crisis over, UNICEF participates in the restoration of essential services. In this context, the Rapid-Pro platform is used to address community mistrust of health services and health seeking behaviors.

- **User-friendly information**: Polls enable segmentation by geographic area, gender and age while harnessing community information so UNICEF can review the effectiveness of its programs in meeting identified needs.

> **Among the 11 countries using the U-Report application, Liberia, being the smallest country, with a very low literacy rate has now the 4th largest number of U-reporters of all the countries. The reason for this interest is due to a well targeted and very intense campaign to recruit U-Reporters.**

Challenges

- Low literacy level: In Liberia where the literacy rate is of 60%, it is assumed that recruitment of individuals will be more difficult.
- Generational and cultural gaps: While trying to recruit U-Reporters beyond youth, it became clear to UNICEF that there was a generational and technological gap among users.
- Maintaining and keeping the tool relevant for UNICEF's programming

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[4] The application does not require a smartphone

and keeping it interesting for u-reporters.

> *"The platform is a champion for transmitting the voices of hard to reach, underprivileged, marginalized and less-fortunate youth to policy makers and implementers. I referred to it as a cradle of hope and an igniting point."*
>
> - John S. Smith, Jr., Secretary General, Federation of Liberian Youth(FLY)

Lessons Learned

- C4D provided the programmatic and strategic framework to maximize the utilization of U-Report in the context of the EVD crisis. It supports and reinforces interventions.

- U-Report helped verify how rigorous the monitoring process was by confirming rumors.

- The recruitment process is as important as the campaigning around the project. The involvement and adoption of U-Report by influential individuals in the community is an asset and should not be overlooked.

- U-Report should be integrated throughout programming and planning of interventions.

- U-report will be valuable during the post-Ebola transition phase focusing on restoration of services.

COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

Summarizing the impact of communication in responding to the Ebola epidemic