



WHY?

South Africa has made great strides in addressing public health challenges like HIV and TB, and strengthening systems to improve maternal and child health outcomes. Health is a national priority; policies and programmes are in place; and for those people who can access health services, the system generally works. Yet challenges remain with regard to quality of care as well as service coverage and access. In certain parts of the country, families and children risk being left behind.

The reasons for these challenges vary. In some instances the services are not readily available or inadequately coordinated or delivered. In others, it stems from the client's lack of awareness, or from waiting until the situation is critical before seeking health care.

The use of mobile and other technologies for health represents a huge opportunity for strengthening service access and delivery across South Africa and the world. Mobile phone ownership and usage is widespread among all age groups in the country, and internet accessibility is increasing. Reaching out to people through their phones can therefore play a big role in raising awareness, and promoting improved and more timely health-seeking behaviour. At the same time, through better use of technology in health facility settings, gaps and bottlenecks in service delivery can be identified in real time and rapidly addressed.

WHAT? USE OF MOBILE AND OTHER TECHNOLOGY TO STRENGTHEN OUTREACH, DELIVERY AND UPTAKE OF HEALTH SERVICES

UNICEF has supported the introduction of various forms of mobile technology in the South African health system and continues to promote innovation in this area. The objectives and target audience vary, but the overall goal is to improve coverage and access to services. This includes determining where and why the system is weak; strengthening connections with the people who need services; promoting collective effort and synergies among practitioners; building knowledge and creating demand among beneficiaries; and ensuring families and children receive the care they require.

Working closely with Government and partners, UNICEF has been involved in piloting mHealth concepts and initiatives that aim to understand and address challenges in access, delivery and uptake of services. Some of these initiatives have gone to scale in the country, while others are in varying stages of development, testing and roll-out.

- o **MomConnect:** Introduced to help educate pregnant women and mothers and link them to health care, MomConnect uses SMS technology to send regular messages appropriate to the stage of pregnancy or age of the baby. Pregnant women are registered onto the programme during their first visit to the health facility, and they receive reminders of clinic visits, tests and medicines. MomConnect is helping to strengthen women's knowledge of good health care practices for themselves and their babies, while also improving service uptake.



MOBILE PHONE ACCESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

94 per cent of the women classified as “bottom of the pyramid” in terms of socioeconomic status owned cell phones and the remaining 6 per cent could access a phone within the family.



Mobile phone ownership among South African youth is widespread ranging from 69 per cent for 14-18 year olds to 89 per cent for 19- 25 year olds.



More than 90 per cent of young people aged 14 to 25 have access to a mobile phone, even if they do not own one.



An online survey found that 84 per cent of young people would use their phone to access health information on the Internet if it were free.



- **Real Time Tracking for HIV positive babies:** Implemented as a pilot, this initiative aimed to understand why babies in certain pockets of the country continue to be infected with HIV from their mothers. It used SMS technology and the Rapid Pro platform to track what is happening in two ways: 1) ‘backward’ tracking to understand the gaps in the delivery of care (what went wrong and where) so as to facilitate targeted programme action (where to act and what to do); and 2) ‘forward’ tracking to understand the linkage to care and treatment for both the baby and the mother.



- **The Last Mile Network:** South Africa has made dramatic progress in preventing mother to child transmission of HIV and is now focused on achieving the “last mile” and actually eliminating the possibility of babies being infected through their mothers. The Last Mile Network is a virtual platform that was launched in 2016 by the South African Minister of Health during the International AIDS Conference in Durban. Under leadership of Government, and with support from UNICEF and PEPFAR, the network aims to bring together the UN, development and implementing partners, academia, civil society, media and the private sector in a collective effort towards the goal of ‘No child born with HIV’ in South Africa. It provides easy access to the latest data, news and resources on the elimination of mother to child transmission of HIV (EMTCT) in South Africa, and serves as a platform to promote collaboration and synergies among stakeholders.
- **Digitalization of the Road to Health Booklet:** South Africans have a Road to Health Booklet that is issued at birth and helps health workers to record and monitor a child’s growth, development and care - including vaccinations, HIV and TB status, illnesses and hospital admissions. It contains essential health promotion messages and is a powerful tool to support children’s optimal development; empower caregivers; and ensure holistic and continuous care. In practice, however, there are challenges to ensure the booklet’s optimum use. The Department of Health is therefore leading the digitalization of the booklet with support from UNICEF and other partners. The digital version will be accessible on all types of mobile phones and includes messaging to remind parents and caregivers of when they need to take their children for clinic visits. It also includes features such as plotting the child’s weight and height to better understand growth monitoring.



- **Engaging adolescents in health care with a focus on HIV - Vizool Eyes:** Adolescents and young people face challenges in accessing and adhering to health care. Survey statistics highlight that approximately 14 per cent of adolescents living with HIV in South Africa are accessing anti-retroviral treatment (ART); and for those who are, there are gaps in retention in care. Globally, adolescents are the only group where HIV mortality has been on the rise in recent years. Building on evidence that adolescents who have hopes and dreams for the future are more likely to take care of their health and adhere to treatment, UNICEF is currently supporting Government to develop Vizool Eyes – a youth engagement portal for use on mobile phones. The entire application will be visual, making use of emojis and avatars to facilitate communication between young people and health care providers. It is envisaged that the portal will also facilitate linkages to other platforms, such as B Wise, that offer peer support, health information, symptom reporting and advice on how to plan for the future.

Youth Engagement Portal



HOW? PILOT, EVALUATE AND SCALE

In supporting these mobile technology innovations, UNICEF works with Government and partners to develop the concept and application; initiate usage in certain areas of the country; test how it works; and, depending on the results, facilitate continuation and scale up. MomConnect, for example, was piloted in 2011, and following the learnings and success in 2 districts, was scaled up across the country. By 2016, more than one million pregnant women and mothers have used the service. Similarly, the Real Time Tracking project was piloted in 2016 in three districts of KwaZulu Natal, and a paper version is now being used across the country with exploratory work in progress to inform scale up.

WHO? GOVERNMENT, PARTNERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

UNICEF works closely with the Department of Health to pilot and implement all the various innovations using mobile technology for health. Other partners, including PEPFAR, University of Cape Town and the private sector, have supported the piloting and scale up of several mHealth initiatives. Civil society and youth who stand to benefit from mHealth are engaged during the development phase of such initiatives to ensure they are relevant and responsive to their needs and interests.



WHAT NEXT? SCALING FOR THE FUTURE

UNICEF and the Department of Health are working to take initiatives to scale and continuously monitor and evaluate implementation and learnings. By introducing the concept; developing and testing; and evaluating the outcomes of mHealth initiatives, UNICEF is helping Government to find innovative solutions; make best use of available resources; promote synergies and collaboration; and target interventions in the areas where they are needed most.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

By supporting the introduction and scale up of mobile health technologies, companies have the opportunity to demonstrate private sector leadership and contribute to concrete, positive change in the way health care is accessed and delivered in the country. In doing so, you directly support the objectives of the National Development Plan as well as the Sustainable Development Goals in South Africa. Companies that work in the field of technology also have an excellent opportunity to create shared value by contributing research and innovation capacity to develop novel, cost effective solutions that lead to better health outcomes for all.

CONTACT US

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