Swaziland

Government leadership in ensuring citizen feedback on health

Abstract

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Eastern and Southern Africa Region (ESAR) Programme Monitoring and Response (PMR) Initiative is developing Swaziland's first-ever subnational health dashboards. These display the status of important health indicators, such as those related to nutrition, immunization, and antenatal care, which are generated by near real-time monitoring (NRTM) of health facility data. The key focus of the initiative is strengthening the newly piloted electronic health Client Management Information System (CMIS) to generate reliable and quality real-time data, with staff capacity-building for the use of that data for planning and monitoring health interventions. UNICEF Swaziland has also introduced an SMS-based citizen engagement platform, U-Report, to generate feedback from health facility clients and to promote public health messages. Engagement with the Government of Swaziland proved to be a critical first step in introducing U-Report, followed by explaining how the platform could be used as a health system strengthening platform in order to gain the trust and understanding of health workers.

U-Report is formally launched in Swaziland after high-level Government approval.

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Issue

Swaziland's 287 health facilities are dispersed across the country's four regions. To understand the level of satisfaction among health facility clients, the Ministry of Health conducts a Client Satisfaction Survey every two years, the results of which are generated months after the completion of the survey. Meanwhile, aggrieved healthcare clients use national media outlets to voice their concerns.

With funding from the US Fund for UNICEF and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, UNICEF is therefore supporting the Government of Swaziland to gather client feedback through a real-time SMS-based system to influence timely improvements in the quality of services provided. The key focus of the initiative is to provide reliable and quality real-time data from the client perspective to health facility managers, and to strengthen their capacity to use the data to improve the quality of services provided in health facilities.

Strategy and implementation

The initiative is supporting the operationalization of U-Report (Figure 1), as Swaziland's primary real-time citizen engagement and social accountability SMS platform. The introduction of U-Report has been met with great enthusiasm by clients who now not only have a mechanism that enables them to raise their concerns on any issues within the facility, but which also allows them to receive subsequent feedback that ultimately enhances the quality of services.

From 2015, U-Report questionnaires have been issued on five key issues, such as facility staff distribution (captured by waiting time), health worker attitudes, and availability of medicines and supplies, etc. Health facility staff sensitize and mobilize all patients to enrol in U-Report and respond to the questionnaire by sending a trigger text to a short code. Results from the feedback are analysed and shared with all facility staff during monthly meetings. This prompts decision-making and
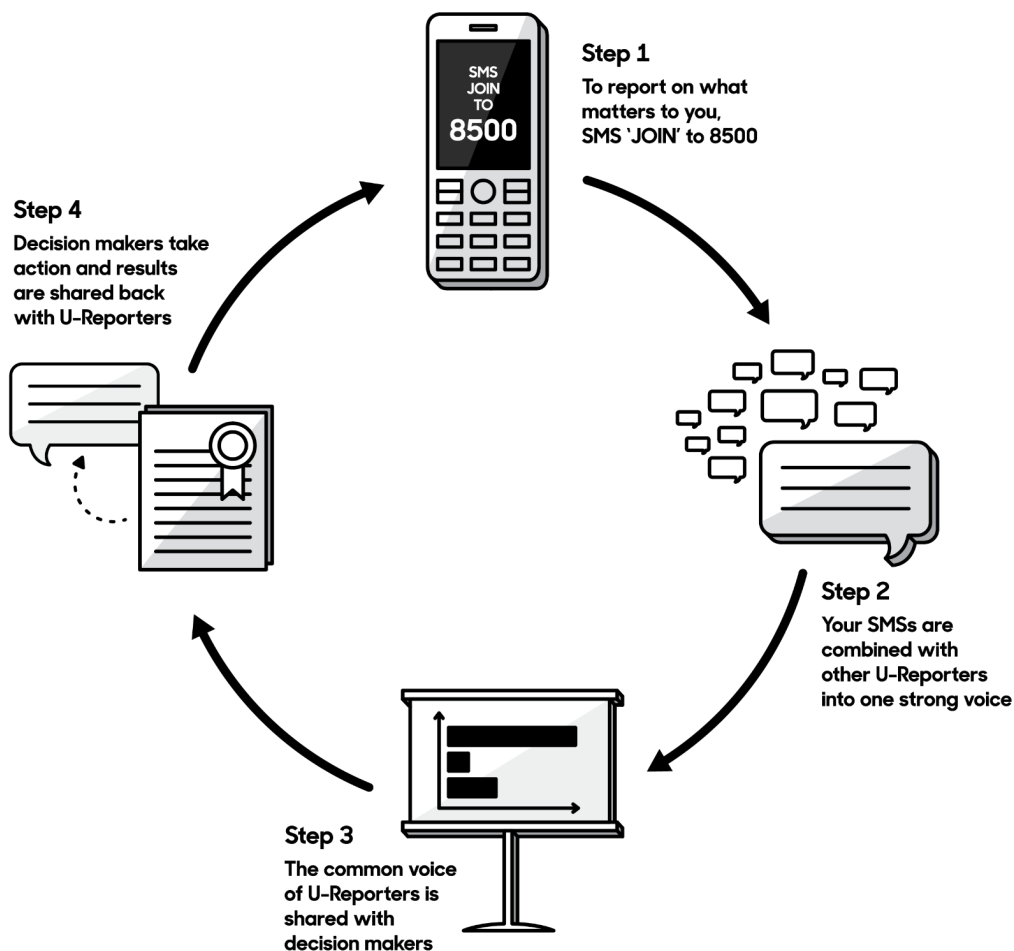

U-Report citizen engagement and social accountability SMS platform

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influences improvements and other changes within the institution, as per the feedback provided by clients. Decisions and action taken are shared with clients which motivates clients to sign up to the questionnaire. Clients see that their concerns are noted and that action is taken thereafter, making them feel fully involved.

The decentralized nature of this community engagement complements evidence generated by health facilities so that decision makers can make timely, well-informed decisions. In addition, U-Report is being used to share public health messages, particularly around maternal and child health.

Figure 1: U-Report citizen engagement and social accountability SMS platform

Step 1
To report on what matters to you, SMS 'JOIN' to 8500

Step 2
Your SMSs are combined with other U-Reporters into one strong voice

Step 3
The common voice of U-Reporters is shared with decision makers

Step 4
Decision makers take action and results are shared back with U-Reporters

Source: U Report, Swaziland Voice Matters

Lessons learned

Citizen feedback through U-Report is a core component of NRTM and is now reaping positive results. However, its development stalled early on in the project as a result of a lack of engagement with the national Government and health facility staff, causing UNICEF to adapt its approach significantly.

Lesson 1:   Securing Government ownership early on

For the Government to use U-Report evidence to justify policy-level decisions it must understand how the platform functions and that the evidence presented is reliable. During the initial startup phase, UNICEF had a series of consultative meetings with the Cabinet Office and Deputy Prime Minister's Office to formally introduce and present the platform to the Government of Swaziland. The Government requested the holistic engagement of select ministry offices as well as potential non-governmental organization (NGO) partners for the success of the pilot of the platform. In November 2015, the Government officially launched the platform through the Deputy Prime Minister's Office.

A stakeholder meeting was convened by UNICEF during which all partners were cautioned that U-Report would not be used for political purposes. Three programmatic areas of engagement were collectively defined and agreed, namely: health, education and child protection. UNICEF developed a Partner Statute clearly defining how U-Report could be used and spelling out the roles and responsibilities of each partner NGO. The Country Representative of UNICEF Swaziland provided regular updates on U-Report activities to the Permanent Secretary at the Deputy Prime Minister's Office to show transparency to the Government and build trust.

According to U-Report National Coordinator, Nontobeko Mbuyane: *"A major achievement for the project is the high-level support from Government. This engagement at the beginning is absolutely critical, to allow activities to proceed effectively, to encourage Government to own the system, which is important for its sustainability, and finally because if you have problems down the line, you know you have institutional support to work things through without the programme falling apart."*

Lesson 2:   Promoting U-Report as a health management information system strengthening platform

Once formal Government approval had been issued, UNICEF visited health facilities to support the engagement of clients through U-Report. However, the context in each facility varied significantly and so the same approach could not be applied across all facilities. For example, one matron, the most senior staff member, embraced innovation and understood the importance of citizen feedback from day one, saying it was the opportunity the facility had been waiting for to improve the quality of services offered based on client assessment. Her staff were all responsive and were authorized to cooperate and engage with UNICEF.

In other facilities, there was some suspicion about the aims of the citizen engagement and every detail had to be referred to senior staff, delaying implementation. There was also a misconception within facilities that UNICEF was running two programmes, one on NRTM dashboard development and one on citizen feedback as the two teams would visit at different times and interact with staff separately. Nontobeko Mbuyane explains: *"Some health facility staff assumed the client feedback would be used to highlight incompetence and pit users against the health facilities. We had not articulated the objective clearly enough at that stage"*.

One of the key lessons was therefore to promote U-Report as a data-collection and system strengthening platform to provide quality assurance as part of the NRTM, rather than being the equivalent of a digital patient suggestion box. Nonto Mbuyane continues: *"U-Report's stated role in the PMR initiative is to create awareness around Government systems that provide specific services to the public. This is important for two reasons, firstly in managing the expectations of U-Reporters and secondly in providing confidence for health facility staff and Government as to U-Report's function"*.

Once U-Report data were integrated into the health management information system (HMIS) dashboards, UNICEF staff began visiting the health facilities together with the HMIS team from the Ministry of Health. A much clearer understanding of the function of U-Report naturally then emerged, and due to the trust garnered by seeing UNICEF working from within a Ministry team, staff also warmed to the use of citizen feedback and encouraged their clients to use the platform.

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— Nontobeko Mbuyane

Progress and results

Client feedback data have improved the work of the health facilities, motivated staff when their good work is highlighted, assisted with planning, and given clients confidence that the issues they raise are being addressed. In one facility, for example, clients complained through U-Report that when they visited the hospital with cold symptoms, such as a fever, they were not given medication as they expected, such as vitamin C tablets or cough mixture. This led to an internal discussion and a subsequent decision to conduct client education during appointments. Nurses now emphasize the client's role in keeping themselves well, such as by eating fruit every day, and advise that medication is not automatically prescribed for a cold.

Nelisiwe Dlamini, Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist, UNICEF Swaziland, comments: *"In this way, the use of data is influencing several things concurrently, including community education on health, a reduction in prescribed medicines with associated cost savings, an emphasis on individual responsibility for maintaining good health practices, such as healthy eating, and health staff who are empowered to use data in a positive way."*

Figure 2: A typical U-Report poll designed to measure awareness of a health issue to guide health facility planning

Poll question: Testing is an important part of getting to zero infections. Do you know your HIV status? Yes / No
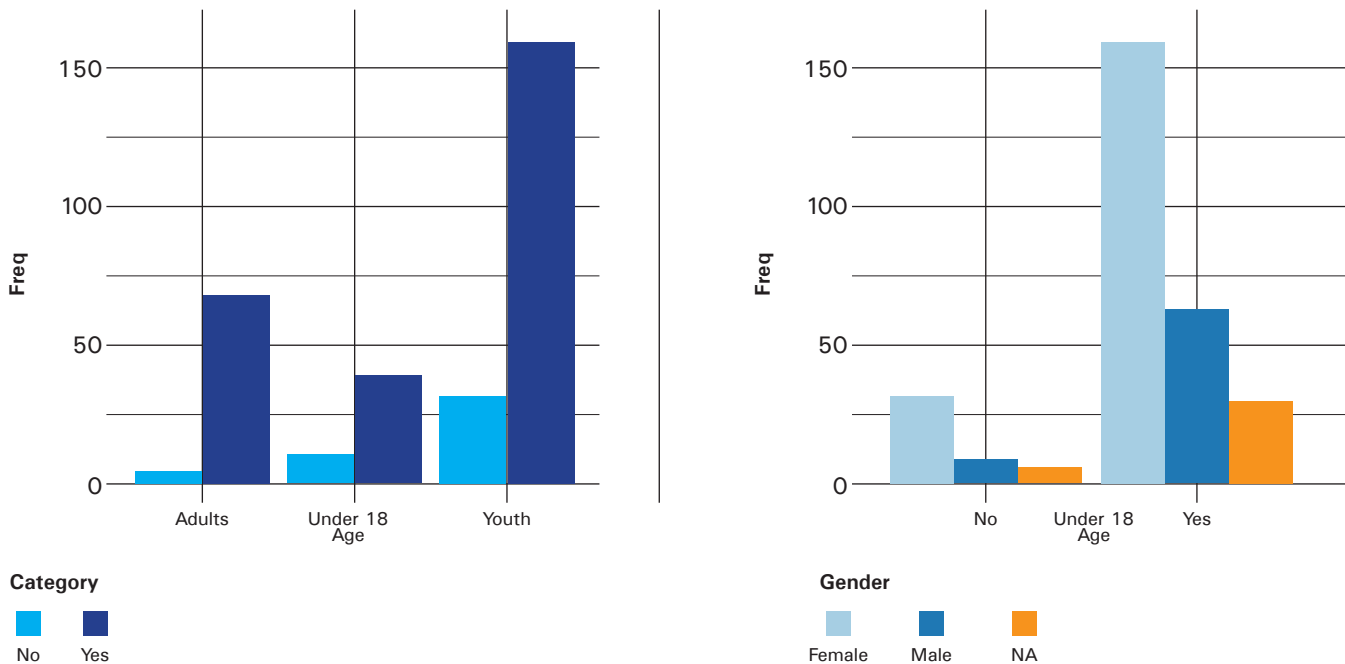
Next steps

Sustaining the initiative effectively will require that U-Reporters are updated on actions being taken at the local level in response to their feedback. Investment is therefore being made to create demand for continued use of U-Report by both citizens and health facility staff.

Plans are in place to ensure that U-Report is scaled up and expanded to all health facilities in the country to support quality assurance systems strengthening and quality healthcare delivery.

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