



UNIVERSITÉ
DE GENÈVE

GENEVA SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS
AND MANAGEMENT

U-Report

Name: U-Report

Organization: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

Year launched: 2011

Countries: Piloted in Uganda; deployed in 54 countries globally

Users: 6 million people globally

The U-Report journey started in 2007, with the creation of RapidSMS, an open-source SMS platform that supported data collection and youth engagement activities at UNICEF. RapidSMS was developed with an idea to reach communities in the most marginalized and remote areas by means of basic mobile phones. RapidSMS was designed to be customized for the challenges of governments, multilateral, international- and non-government organizations, and development practitioners: working effectively regardless of geographical remoteness of constituents, limited infrastructure (roads, electricity), and slow data collection (due to paper-based records, slow courier systems, etc.)¹.

UNICEF Uganda country office developed RapidSMS for monitoring and data collection in their areas of work, such as health, nutrition and WASH sectors (water, sanitation and hygiene). It was launched in early 2011, under the leadership of the Ugandan country office Representative as a tool for young people to be heard on issues that mattered most to them and their community. The Uganda country office identified challenges such as the lack of channels to engage and hear young people's opinions and recognized the rise in the usage of mobile phones which had an increasing penetration rate in the country. It was recognized as a powerful tool to reach young people who were traditionally not engaged or heard. The country office hired a former IT and digital media consultant, who would go on to become the first U-Report manager, to create a mobile-based application that could communicate directly with youth on important topics.

Using the UNICEF supported RapidSMS, the manager and his small team created the tool now called U-Report. This new tool aimed to give an opportunity to every young person in Uganda to participate in the decisions that affected them and take an active role in the development of the country, leading to transparency and accountability at the grassroots level. Over this period the country office developed partnerships with the government, NGOs, youth organizations, and the parliament and local NGOs.

With the inception of U-Report in Uganda, young people took part in polls and started giving feedback to government on their policies and programs. Responses received by SMS on U-Report were analyzed in real time. The data was mapped at the local level and compiled nationally and results were displayed on a public website by age, gender and location. U-Reporters were made anonymous in order to protect young people when sharing sensitive information. The first pilot involved

¹ <https://www.rapidsms.org/about/>

understanding why youth were not satisfied with a new program deployed by the government. Using U-Report, UNICEF found out that young people wanted easier regulations to access government funds. The poll results were shared with the government by UNICEF and as a result the government listened to the young people, or U-Reporters, and improved the program. This marked a turning point for the tool and after the proof of concept, the U-Report team began scaling up the tool in the country to reach more people and increase the potential for impact.

In 2012, the technical capabilities were added and developed by the U-Report team. New tools were added in the system - such as partner dashboards and programming manual flows. After the initial pilot in Uganda reached 200,000 people, U-Report started scaling in other neighboring countries, reaching Zambia and Burundi in 2012. Zambia country office sent an engineer to Uganda to work closely with the U-Report team to set up the system and U-Report strategy for Zambia. During the process Zambia office also desired a need for one-on-one interaction with young people using U-Report. This culminated into the development of U-Partners (or Case Pro) – a dashboard enabling partners to respond to individual messages coming in from young people from any channel.

At the time of this case, U-Partners, the Peer helpline of 21st century, allowed for confidential reporting that enables and empowers young people to speak out and report, ask questions and seek information they may otherwise be too embarrassed or afraid to seek. For example in Mozambique more than 130,000 adolescents were counseled and referred to health providers in Mozambique in 2017 on a variety of issues, such as HIV/AIDS prevention, sexual and reproductive health, early marriage or violence against children daily. U-Reporters also provided their feedback on their treatment at health centers, which UNICEF shared with the Ministry of Health to amplify their voices and address their challenges.

In 2016, the tool reached 3 million people globally and as of September 2018, U-Report reached almost 6 million young people and was being implemented in 54 countries, with more countries scheduled to launch. The size of U-Report both in terms of beneficiaries involved and country offices utilizing the platform had doubled from 2015 - 2018. The platform continued to grow daily, with on average one person signing up to U-Report every 30 seconds. In developing countries, SMS still remained the channel of delivery used most (65%), but digital channels gained traction, as U-Report expanded to Facebook messenger, Viber, Telegram, LINE and WhatsApp. In each country where U-Report scaled, the tool was deployed for a specific purpose and contextualized to that environment. Each UNICEF country office generated their own funding to implement U-Report, and on average each office employed one full time staff who worked on the initiative.

“One million voices are more powerful than 1000 voices,” explained one U-Report Global Coordinator. For example, in 2015, UNICEF polled young Liberians with the question: “Do U agree that sex 4 grades is a problem in our schools?” The report showed that 86% of young respondents from all regions of the West African state replied “yes” – a staggering result that led to coverage in TIME Magazine.² “The kind of accountability that we’re used to here in America simply doesn’t exist,” says Sheldon Yett, UNICEF’s Liberia representative. “Teachers have a high status in Liberia’s close-knit communities, where children are not taught to speak up.” UNICEF’s use of U-Report was aimed to give those children a voice.

In another example, UNICEF sent a poll to girls in Pakistan in 2015 asking if they knew what was happening when they started menstruating, and if they knew of the government’s menstrual hygiene facilities. The responses, showing a clear lack of knowledge on the topic, were mapped by age and

² Zebede, Michal and Shiza Shahid, ‘Liberia’s ‘Sex4Grades’ Epidemic is Ruining Children’s Lives,’ *TIME*, April 5, 2016. <http://time.com/4282516/liberias-sex4grades-epidemic/>

location and shared with local partners in order to increase access to information. Based on this poll, UNICEF created a Bot called 'Chutki' that answered girls' questions on issues regarding the menstrual cycle in real-time. The Chutki bot then scaled up from Pakistan to Nigeria, Indonesia, Cote di'Ivoire and Tanzania. At this point, U-Report also expanded partnerships beyond local telecom companies to private sector companies (such as Facebook, Viber, WhatsApp) and NGOs.

The U-Report Global Team confronted challenges embedding the tool internally within all projects. Internally, UNICEF saw the impact of this tool at two levels. At the country level, prioritization and reach increased significantly. The importance of top country management also became apparent. As the Global team explained, "If there is not enough support and need from the country office management, there will be delays and challenges scaling the tool locally." One of 6 key areas in UNICEF's strategic plan now focuses on innovation (with a dual focus on increasing efficiency and reaching more people, cheaper). Organizationally, there is vast support and a shift to innovation becoming a priority at UNICEF HQ. In September 2018, UNICEF along with world leaders launched Generation Unlimited, a new partnership to get every young person into quality education, training or employment by 2030. *Generation Unlimited* will tackle the global education and training crisis currently holding back millions of young people and threatening progress and stability and U-Report will support the implementation and roll-out of the new youth agenda.

In 2018, plans for U-Report included building out the technology back-end to allow for faster data analytics and more robust scaling opportunities. Using Artificial Intelligence, U-Report also offered U-Report Bots, which learned about its users and what they needed to know and interacted with them in private on sensitive issues. The U-Report Bots were locally adaptable and related to young people and communities to answer their questions intelligently and sensitively. It was a 'smart' approach to respond to queries via SMS and digital channels on issues such as children's rights, disaster risk reduction, health care, immunizations, nutrition, access to safe water and sanitation services, basic education and protection. U-Report bots had the ability to answer 10 times more U-Report questions at a much lower cost as more U-Reporters became digital. This technological shift allowed U-Report to dramatically increase its reach and impact on youth around the world.

Key success factors: localized country focus; support from global HQ team; dedicated team

Key challenge: Global data analytics complicated significantly by pace of growth and differences in country projects.

Summary	Tech		Scale	Partners	Impact	Success Factors	
SMS-based youth engagement and education platform	HIGH TECH	Tech used: SMS, AI	SCALED	Private sector, non profit	SOCIAL INTERNAL	Initiative: Applicable in many locations	Organizational: Dedicated team, executive buy-in