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TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE
AND RESILIENT WASH SERVICES

Improving Zimbabwe urban WASH
service delivery through U-Report

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The Government of Zimbabwe and UNICEF are implementing a Small Towns WASH Programme (STWP) in 14 towns of Zimbabwe. Hygiene Promotion is one of the key programme components and related activities are being delivered through community, school and market health clubs. UNICEF in partnership with the Government of Zimbabwe is piloting the use of mobile SMS based service delivery case management system known as U-Report under the STWP. U-Report is a free SMS social monitoring tool for community participation, designed to address issues that the population cares about. U-Report started out as a local innovation to help young Ugandans engage on issues that affect their lives and futures. This paper details the experience of piloting the U-Report system in strengthening community participation in WASH service delivery, in Zimbabwe's Small Towns WASH Programme.

Introduction

Historically, Zimbabwe's Urban WSS services development has been driven by principles of high service levels and standards, and universal access for all, making them unique in Africa. (Water Policy, 2013).

However, the country has since seen a decline in coverage and level of service and did not meet its MDG targets for water and sanitation.

- Access to improved water supply in urban areas decreased from 100% in 1990 to 97% in 2015,
- Access to improved sanitation in urban areas decreased from 52% in 1990 to 49% in 2015 (not including shared facilities) (WHO-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme 2015)
- Hourly availability of water dropped from 24hrs supply to between 6 and 12 hours per day, and
- Costs exceeded tariffs in 50% of urban local authorities as of 2012 (Zimbabwe National Water policy, 2013).

The major problems faced by the urban councils in WASH service provision in Zimbabwe include ageing WASH infrastructure, reduced revenue collection and resources, lack of staff/poorly motivated staff, poor management practices and lack of residents trust due to the poor service.

Consumer relations and responsiveness is key in maintaining service levels as it affects willingness to pay, which in turn affect Operation and Maintenance (O&M) budget availability; additionally, timely reporting of faults and increase in level of service depends on positive consumer relations. The Zimbabwe Country Status Overview 2012 reports that consumer voice is weak for water and sanitation services and improved responsiveness to consumers will provide important future checks and balances to improve service management.

The potential for ICT tools to improve the quality and sustainability of water and sanitation services in low-resource settings is increasingly gaining attention (Hutchings *et al.,* 2012). This interest has skyrocketed due to the often-successful application of digital tools in the health, agriculture and education sectors, and by the cumulative ease of access and relative low cost of mobile phones. In Africa, for example, mobile phone penetration is approximately 75% (Biosca, 2015) whilst Zimbabwe boasts of mobile penetration rate of 95.6%, although this may be due to multiple sim card ownership (Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe, 2015). Generally, this means mobile phone

applications have proven useful for connecting remote groups with central operators, helping to improve the reaction time between reporting of a disservice and rectifying the same; increasing the efficiency of service delivery and reducing the cost of operation (Conley *et al.,* 2010).

U-Reporting

Since the cholera outbreak of 2008/9 which resulted in over 4,000 deaths in Zimbabwe, various development partners in collaboration with the government have been working in the urban WASH sector on infrastructure rehabilitation, system strengthening and governance of local councils through capacity building for improving billing systems, O&M, customer care, hygiene, and improvement of residents/councils relations.

As part of its development programme, UNICEF in partnership with the Government of Zimbabwe (GOZ) is implementing a Small Towns WASH Programme (STWP) in 14 towns of Zimbabwe with funding from the Australian Government. The STWP comprises three broad areas; 1) rehabilitation of critical water and sewerage infrastructure 2) hygiene promotion and customer care 3) institutional strengthening of local councils WASH capacity. In order to improve on sustainability and operation and maintenance as well as fostering a sense of ownership, one of the key strategies was to improve stakeholder relations through effective communication and feedback mechanisms contributing to the STWP output on improved customer responsiveness and ownership for WASH.

To this end, several communication and interactive platforms were introduced. These included the suggestion boxes, complaints and complement registers, WhatsApp, website as well as ward based consultations. However, the above mechanisms are not real time since it would take some time for the consumer to reach the reporting point; also, feedback to the consumer may not happen or will take some time, depending on the nature of the problem.

Under the STWP, five towns (Gwanda, Plumtree, Gokwe, Rusape and Mvurwi) were selected in June 2016 to pilot customer reporting on a real time SMS platform called U- Report, where communication between the reporter and the operators on the ground is instantaneous. This entails that the problem is attended to promptly and feedback to the U-Reporter is also real time. Following the success of the one year pilot and through sharing of experiences by the five towns, an additional 4 towns adopted the system in November 2017 and 3 more in February 2018, bringing the total to 12 out of the 14 towns.

The U-Report is a SMS tool that can be used for various purposes; it has been used for confidential counselling, information dissemination and citizen engagement. U-Reporters from 15 countries, mostly in Africa, are currently using the system; an innovation that started in Uganda to help youths engage on issues that affect their lives and futures.

Report generation process

The reporting of faults commences with a community member acting as a reporter sending by SMS, a key word to 33500 and receiving a menu option in reply. The menu allows the reporter to select amongst other issues, water, sewage, solid waste and open defecation. The platform then prompts the reporter to specify the exact location and problem description. The resultant complete report is immediately received by the U-Report System Administrator for a respective local authority, Head of the relevant department for the reported problem and selected field operatives who will then attend to the problem and provide feedback to the system administrator, who then provides feedback to the U-Reporter.

Figure 1. Report Generation Process
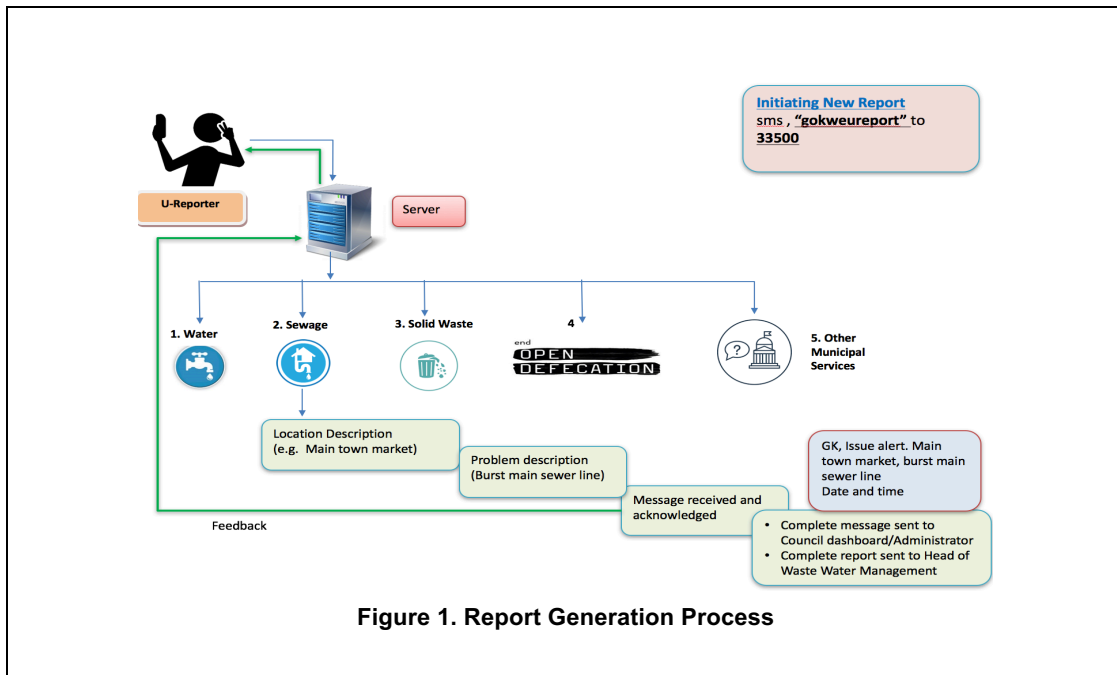
The U-Report system serves as case management tool for reporting service delivery issues, assigning jobs to relevant technical teams and provide feedback on reported service delivery complaints. Additionally, the platform is also being used as a tool for monitoring and evaluating service provisions in councils and to improve and measure social accountability as the town councils provide and receive feedback on the levels and timelines of service delivery on a regular basis.

Figure 2. U-Report System Management
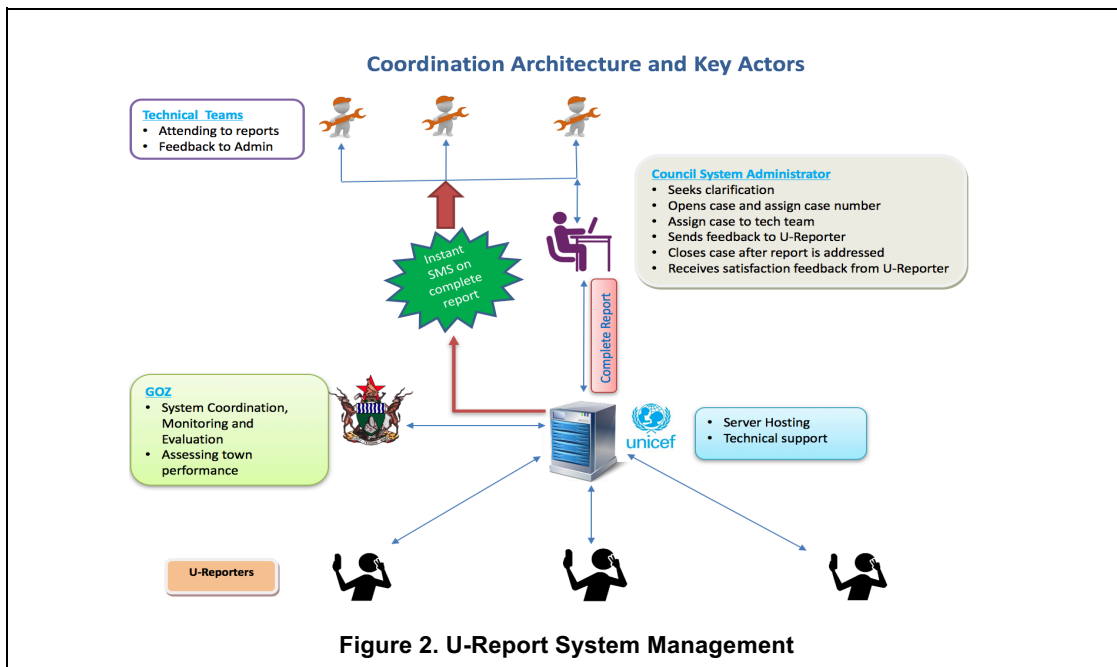
Importance of stakeholder involvement

The approach adopted in the implementation of U-Report was to ensure inclusiveness of all stakeholders ranging from health clubs to ward councilors. Involving the stakeholders in the decision making process through communicating, cooperating and associating with them, proved worthwhile and made them take ownership of the programme initiatives, thus increasing efficiency in service delivery. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities (who reports to who and the whole communication cycle) have been attributed to

different stakeholders' active participation in the successful implementation of the U-Report system and this has minimized conflicts among the stakeholders.

Roll out methodology and process

Identification of reporters

Twenty people from each of the five towns were selected covering all wards through consultations with the ward Councilors; the reporters were each provided with a simple cell phone. Emphasis on choosing the U-Reporters was mainly on those actively involved in WASH activities such as members from health and hygiene clubs, care givers and health promoters.

Figure 3. STWP U-Report Roadmap
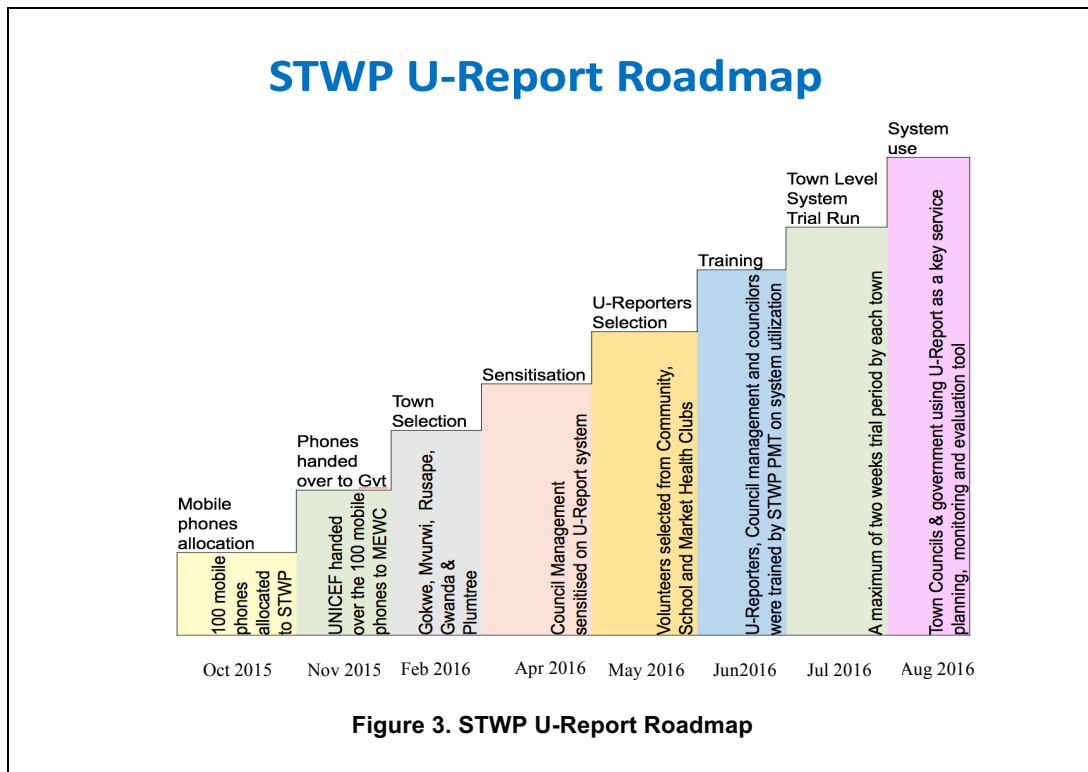
Training of reporters

A one and a half day training workshop was conducted by hired consultant to train the U-Reporters on how to use the SMS platform in each town. In towns such as Rusape and Gokwe, the training also involved the Councilors who also did awareness meetings and introduced the reporters to their respective communities. Each U-Reporter for the pilot 5 towns were issued with a handset and sim card. The sim cards were serialized and identified to the respective U-Reporters for easy tracing of the U-Reporters. Furthermore, each reporter signed an indemnity form for security purposes regarding usage of the mobile phone. To ensure sustainability of the programme, reporters in the additional towns were asked to use own phones and lines and this has been proving to be a success. However, the project provided the technical support and training as with the first 5 pilot towns.

Rolling out

The reporters commenced sending reports for a one month trial period whilst management monitored the quality of the reports. Each town held an evaluation meeting for the trial run after one month to evaluate reports sent during the trial period. Each report was assessed for quality and accuracy of articulation (explaining the location and nature of the problem). After these evaluation meetings, the U-Report was formally launched. The reports are automatically reflected on the mobile phones of the responsible person in the local authority who immediately sees to it that the complaint is attended to. Once the complaint has

been attended to, the responsible person uses the same platform to notify the complainant that the issue has been rectified.

Impact of U-Reporting on urban WASH

The use of U-Report system across the five towns resulted in significant and improved consistency and efficiency in the delivery of WASH related services. The information movement platform has been decentralized and this has yielded results as rate payers now no longer need to travel to the nearest council offices to report service delivery issues, whilst on the other hand, councils' operatives now receive reports on faults instantly, resulting in reduced response time. With the introduction of the reporting-system in Mvurwi Town for example, U-Reporters have submitted over 300 reports in just 3 months. The U-Report system also produces reports on number of reported cases and status of the cases, which in the case of the STWP has provided a means for decision-makers at administrative level to make informed planning and resource allocation for service provision.

The council managers are also of the view that such real-time data availability enables them to provide immediate support to service consumers in case of emergency. U-reporting has also enabled the urban community to coalesce around issues of concern and making communication between stakeholders more immediate. Councils are able to use the U-report system to alert residents to service changes, and do mapping of problematic issues such as illegal dumps, treated water and sewage pipe bursts and get feedback on the status of service provision and problem resolution. Some critical decisions on areas of budgeting and resource allocation are made using information from U – Reporting platform. This system is an effective tool of community engagement.

The central government has been active in the implementation of U-Report through monitoring and being part of the town selection process, trainings and subsequent launching. The system serves as a monitoring tool which allows Government through the Programme Management Team particularly Ministry of Local Government (MLG) to keep track of the complaints handling and redress of challenges by the local authorities through the U Report dashboard.

Implementation challenges

Even though the U-Report uses simple feature phones, challenges arise from mobile network limitations and competencies and phone maintenance by local actors. Common challenges relate to poor network connectivity and phone application settings and management. Reporting through the U-Report system is currently limited to registered users only; although it will be ideal to have as many reporters as possible, measures need to be put in place first to ensure reporters do not abuse the system and the system is used only for its intended purpose.

The server is hosted by UNICEF giving government limited control. The cost is paid for by UNICEF and the STWP will have to find ways of ensuring that the server continues to be paid for once the programme ends. Currently, the mobile service provider levy a fee of 3 USD cents and 5 USD cents for incoming and outgoing SMS respectively, which is also paid by UNICEF. It is envisaged that the local authorities through their supervising ministry will pay for the server in the future once they come to appreciate the U Reporting system.

Lessons learnt

There is real time reporting matched with immediate response. Where reporting from remote sites/areas of the town was previously limited, the use of mobile phones for reporting allows information to be digitized and made available at administrative level. The improved information flow has not only improved data availability but also draws attention to the status of monitoring programs themselves and to staff performance.

Key success factors:

- U-Reporters were selected from existing groups of volunteers (Health Club members) who already have strong self-motivation on WASH issues. However, where reporters were selected through nominations by councilors, it took long for the system to be effectively used and the whole programme took a political dimension, thereby rendering it difficult to coordinate.
- Hosting of the server by UNICEF helps prevent potential system abuse.
- High level support from senior government officials in monitoring and implementation of the U-Report system.

- Involvement and training of councilors for sensitization of communities on the U Report Initiative in all the 5 towns.
- Demonstrated commitment and ownership by council through councils' resolutions to adopt and roll out the system.

Conclusion and way forward

The U-Report system has been a useful tool for case management of WASH complaints and unimproved means of tracking customer service level at local council level and also at national ministry level. The system is appreciated within the STWP and 12 of 14 towns in the STWP are implementing the U-Report system. For the initial pilot towns, plans are also underway to expand the number of U-Reporters, which is expected to come after a one day review meeting of the pilot to be hosted by one of the pilot towns. There are plans to negotiate for special SMS rates for the system and also for mobile network service providers to offer free service as part of their social corporate responsibility.

Acknowledgements

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Note

Disclaimer: the views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the government/organisations they work for.

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