BioSpectrum
the business of Bi
24 years of leveraging the business of Bio
www.biospectrumindia.co

Escaping pilot-itis of mHealth innovations

09 December 2013 | News | By BioSpectrum Bureau

Escaping pilot-itis of mHealth innovations



BBC Media Action,(BBC's international development charity) release a policy briefing on mobile health (mHealth) 'Health on move: Can mobile phones save lives'. It was launched in New Delhi by Mr NK Singh, MP Rajya Sabha and Mr Girindre Beeharry, country head, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, India. The policy briefing focuses on how one of the greatest engines of innovation in the 21st century mobile phone offers important opportunities for saving lives.

Commenting on the significance of the document, Mr Yvonne MacPherson, executive director, BBC Media Action, USA said, "The policy briefing 'Health on the move: Can mobile phones save lives?' shares the learning of our large scale mHealth solutions in India and is intended for those who are either using or considering using mobiles to achieve bold health outcomes. With its emphasis on designing for scale and sustainability, we hope that policy makers, governments, donor organizations, NGO's, telecom companies and technologies will find it a useful compliment to this nascent yet rapidly developing field."

Although there is a proliferation of mobile health (mHealth) projects in the developing world, most succumb to 'Pilot-itis' - the inability to scale. the policy briefing reveals that in order to sustainably scale mHealth innovations it is crucial to place the 'user' at the center of the design process, adopt appropriate technology, and forge strategic and mutually beneficial public-private partnerships based on a sound business model.
"The ability to move beyond 'pilot-itis' relies on the use of appropriate partners and appropriate business models which are based on ground realities.

It is a balancing act between using existing technologies that can save lives today versus waiting for super technologies that will become ubiquitous in the future," said Siddhartha Swarup, director, Family health programs, BBC Media Action, India.

The policy briefing draws on BBC Media Action's direct experience in Bihar, a state where 83% of women have access to mobile phones, but only 9% have ever sent an SMS. Recognizing limitations faced by mobile phone users in Bihar, such as low literacy rates, BBC Media Action has used Interactive Voice Response (IVR) to make audio content accessible from any mobile phone via a simple voice call. BBC Media Action developed mHealth services 'Mobile Academy' and 'Mobile Kunji' to equip and train community health workers to communicate life-saving maternal and child health information, and 'Kilkari' to provide families with weekly audio health information linked yo a woman's stage of pregnancy or child's age.

Â

Sara Chamberlain, head of ICT, BBC Media Action says, "Public private partnerships are essential to scale, affordability and sustainability. We are able to make life-saving health content available to the majority of mobile phone subscribers in Bihar - thanks to a significant subsidy from the mobile industry, Airtel, BSNL, Idea, TATA, Reliance and Vodafone have reduced the standard commercial IVR tariff by 90%.

The operators are willing to make this subsidy because they're still covering their network costs - and they recognize the value in forging meaningful, long-term relationships with rural subscribers."
Taking a cue from the success of the program in Bihar, the state governments of Odisha and Uttar Pradesh are collaborating with BBC Media Action to launch the mHealth services in their respective states.