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C4D in Humanitarian Action



Ghana cholera outbreak 2014 – 2015

Engaging youth
through multisectoral
partnerships and the
Agoo digital platform

A case study

BACKGROUND

Cholera is a form of acute, watery diarrhoea that is caused by a bacterial infection. In its most severe form, cholera is one of the swiftest lethal infectious diseases known, characterized by an explosive outpouring of fluid and electrolytes from the body within hours of infection. If not treated appropriately, it can lead to death within hours. In places where drinking water is unprotected from faecal contamination, cholera can spread with stunning speed through entire populations. In an epidemic, there is only one way to contract cholera: by swallowing water or food that has been contaminated with faecal matter that contains the bacteria *vibrio cholera*.¹ Dirty hands are one of the main transmission routes for cholera, and handwashing with soap and clean water is proven to be an effective way to avoid the spread of the disease.

Since the 1980s, Ghana has experienced sporadic outbreaks of cholera. The first major outbreak occurred in 1982, when about 15,032 cases were recorded. From 2014 to early 2015, the country experienced another devastating outbreak of cholera, with about 28,922 cases reported, including 243 deaths. The outbreak was widespread, with 130 out of 216 districts across

10 affected regions. The most affected areas were districts in southern Ghana. The 2014–2015 outbreak is regarded as the deadliest in Ghana's history due to the number of cases involved. Though children suffered during the outbreak, the most affected age group was between 20 and 49 years, which represented about 70 per cent of all reported cholera cases.

The risk factors for cholera outbreaks in Ghana include poor hygiene and environmental sanitation, especially in crowded urban settlements, where lack of potable water, poor drainage systems and improper disposal of both solid and liquid waste are still challenges. According to the 2014 Ghana Demographic Health Survey, only 14 per cent of households in Ghana have access to improved toilets that are not shared with other households. Another 21 per cent of households practice open defecation.² Handwashing with soap, which is proven to be the most cost-effective way of reducing infectious disease, is not done by many Ghanaians. The report states that only 53 per cent of Ghanaians wash their hands with soap, a practice that also leads to other serious health consequences besides cholera.

More than two in five basic schools have no toilets, and every year, 3,600 children under the age of five die due to diarrhoea-related illnesses.

This case study outlines how UNICEF Ghana mobilized individuals and communities to practise preventive behaviours through a multi-channel campaign promoting handwashing. The Communication for Development (C4D) response included the establishment of a multisectoral partnership and the development of the mobile platform Agoo, which was designed to offer tailor-made and personalized information on preventive and management messages on cholera.

Agoo communication platform: A multisectoral partnership

In 2015, UNICEF partnered with the Government of Ghana and the private sector to create Agoo, a mobile-based communication platform. 'Agoo' is a word used across regions and languages in Ghana to announce someone's presence when entering a house, a fitting name for a multilingual service that provides life-saving information to Ghanaians.



The logo of the Agoo platform features a megaphone, signifying that Agoo communicates information loud and clear!

The presence of affordable mobile phone models, good network coverage and a competitive telecommunications industry meant that many Ghanaians were already using mobile phones.

At its inception, Agoo offered three distinct services: (1) a call centre with trained agents responding to callers; (2) Interactive Voice Response (IVR), a technology that enables customers to interact with a company's host system via a telephone keypad (allowing users choice in the selection of topics and a private channel for learning about sensitive topics); and (3) short messaging service (SMS) to disseminate life-saving information.

The Agoo platform includes a real-time dashboard to track user statistics on which topics and messages users select and how long they listen to them. According to an IVR-based user satisfaction survey in 2017, 78 per cent of users expressed that they would recommend the Agoo service to their friends and families.

The Agoo platform has since evolved into one used by young people to access information. It is one of the most interactive voice services in Ghana with a daily call volume averaging 2,575 calls. As of November 2018, nearly two million calls have been received on the Agoo platform from over 460,000 individuals.

Importantly, Agoo is a service partnership between UNICEF Ghana and the country's largest mobile phone network, MTN. Under this arrangement, MTN has provided free airtime worth US\$1 million to its customers to access information on Agoo. Customers can therefore dial a toll free service on 5100, while other mobile users also access information by calling 0540118999 for a small charge.

¹ UNICEF, cholera toolkit, 2013.

² Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), Ghana Health Service (GHS), ICF International, 2015, and Ghana Demographic and Health Survey, 2014. Also see Nana Mireku Gyimah, Paschal Awingura-Apanga and John Koku Awoonor-Williams, "Cyclical cholera outbreaks in Ghana: filth, not myth," *Infectious Disease of Poverty*, vol. 7, no. 51, 2018, <<https://idpjournals.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40249-018-0436-1>>, accessed on 15 November 2018.

METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

Through the Agoo platform and other channels, UNICEF and partners urged a change in hygiene practices among many Ghanaians, especially the youth, by sharing information on the prevention and treatment of cholera. The focus was on the promotion of handwashing with soap as a first line of defence against cholera; it also provided information on Ebola prevention and associated health risks for both diseases.

Designed to meet the information needs of both literate and non-literate Ghanaians, Agoo uses the seven commonly spoken languages in the country: English, Twi, Dagbani, Hausa, Ga, Frafra and Ewe. This allows many people to access life-saving information on health, education, handwashing as well as healthy lifestyles. The messages are made available to people at their own convenience and at no cost, through text messages and/or recorded voice messages on their cell phones.

The platform gained popularity among young people through its promotion on mass media and the mobilization of senior high school students. UNICEF collaborated with the Ghana Education Service and a pool of 16 implementing NGOs to mobilize and educate more than 400,000 high school students (96 per cent of the high school population in Ghana) in response to the cholera outbreak. Each school received buckets and soap for handwashing as well as banners, posters and Agoo wristbands. More than 200,000 students voluntarily registered their phone numbers with the Agoo service. In the event of a cholera or Ebola outbreak, their numbers will be used to distribute essential information in affected areas.



Mobilization of students in Takoradi Technical Senior High School, Western Region. © UNICEF Ghana / 2015 / Neil Shaw.

UNICEF also engaged eight well-known Ghanaian singers representing different languages and regions of the country to produce an edutainment music video called Wash Wana Our Hands³. This catchy karaoke song and dance music features the gesture of handwashing as a choreographic element, and lyrics that promoted the importance of clean hands. The call to action 'Call Agoo to know more' is repeated throughout the music video, with the number prominently displayed on screen. Key messages also include information about cholera and Ebola.



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Scenes from the Wash Wana Our Hands music video. On the left, well-known Ghanaian musician repeats the call to action 'Call Agoo to know more' throughout the video. On the right, a well-known celebrity is seen washing her hands using clean water and soap.

³ The 'Wash Wana Hands' music video is available at <<https://youtu.be/rGjkZPyiD3g>>.

RESULTS

- ✔ Due to its success, at the end of the cholera episode, UNICEF together with other partners transitioned the platform to become a more interactive tool to create demand for information around WASH, education, health, nutrition and child protection issues.
- ✔ Through these strategies, the Agoo platform has become an information hub for adolescents and young people in Ghana. Currently, more than 85 per cent of Agoo users are under 25 years of age, with the majority of them being in senior high schools.
- ✔ More than 120,000 emergency weekly IVR messages on cholera were sent to the affected population during the outbreak response.
- ✔ Based on a survey conducted by Viamo in February 2018, Agoo users have reported changes in attitudes and practices and have adopted some key behaviours such as preventing child marriage (12 per cent), avoiding open defecation (10 per cent), using long lasting insecticidal nets (7 per cent) and practicing handwashing (7 per cent) over the base line period of September 2017.
- ✔ From January to June 2018 alone, the Agoo platform received about 466,019 calls, with 53 per cent of callers being males and 47 per cent females aged 18-24 years. Among the key topics, education-related issues were the most listened to, at 30 per cent, compared with health (24 per cent), child protection (23 per cent) and WASH (23 per cent).
- **Scalability:** There are no limits on the project's scale and it can be linked innovatively to other platforms such as the mobile-phone-based U-Report;
- **Flexibility:** It sends a variety of messages to adolescents that are tailored to their programming needs;
- **Measurability:** It collects user data on the duration of calls and choice of topics in real time.
- ✔ In terms of scalability, the use of the Agoo platform is limited only by the population's access to mobile phones. It is fortunate that Ghana has one of the highest mobile phone penetration rates in Africa. Further, linkages between the Agoo platform and UNICEF's youth engagement platform, U-Report, are being developed, to widen its reach and strengthen feedback loops to those who are responsible for policies and actions related to adolescents.
- ✔ One area of concern is the sustainability of providing free services. Once the memorandum of understanding (MoU) period with the mobile network provider ends, other options such as tapping more private sector engagement and funding would need to be considered.
- ✔ Given the current programmatic direction of UNICEF Ghana, Agoo remains one of the key innovative C4D platforms through which more adolescents and young people can be reached with dynamic content and participatory behaviour change dialogue on sexual and reproductive rights, early childhood care and child protection.
- ✔ Given the effectiveness of the Agoo platform in reaching young people with personalized information, UNICEF showcased the platform at the 2018 Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) Summit as an important innovation incubated in Ghana. Agoo was also featured in two reports from UNICEF Headquarters as a key C4D innovation on adolescent engagement.
- ✔ The Agoo platform is set to transition to a platform for young people to engage with and stay informed on a range of issues that concern them. New participatory content development, interactive games and a link to a gender hotline (counseling service) will be the mainstay of this expanded approach.

LESSONS LEARNT

- ✔ The Agoo platform has proven a valuable tool over the past four years, particularly in reaching young people. As a platform using cell phones, it has a competitive edge over mainstream mass media channels in the following ways:
 - **Cost efficiency:** No costs are incurred for printing, delivery and buying media time for outreach;
 - **Speed:** Key messages are sent within seconds to all subscribers with the click of a button;
 - **Targeting:** Messages are sent to targeted population groups from the database of users who have registered their phone numbers with the service;
- ✔ The Agoo platform is set to transition to a platform for young people to engage with and stay informed on a range of issues that concern them. New participatory content development, interactive games and a link to a gender hotline (counseling service) will be the mainstay of this expanded approach.

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