

ICT4D in Health – Digital Media Project in Ghana

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The excitement of the audience was amplified each time a new character appeared in the scenes of the film they were viewing. Although on breastfeeding, the movie generated all the excitement a Hollywood thriller would trigger for its viewers.

The appeal for the audience was that characters starring in the movie were local people known to them; also the settings were familiar sites around their vicinity.

The visual showing on breastfeeding was one of the public screenings of locally generated health content for the Tamale Municipality in Northern Ghana, by the Health Foundation of Ghana (HFG), a component of the digital media project implemented by HFG and funded by the Netherlands-based International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD).

HFG, is an issue-oriented, not-for-profit, non-governmental organization committed to assisting Ghanaians to achieve better health through the design and implementation of creative solutions and interventions to local health problems using community based resource.

The project sought to stimulate the creation and distribution of local knowledge relevant to mother and child health in a digital format that is inclusive of the illiterate and semi-literate i.e. using low-tech digital technologies e.g. digital video and Video Compact Discs (VCDs) to capture and disseminate local health content in local languages.

HFG's digital media project fed into the goals of the Mother and Child Millennium Development Goals; to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, and to combat HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases with reference to gender equality and poverty reduction.

"A lot of people already use it [digital media] for funerals and weddings to document stuff," says Lynda Arthur, Country Director of HFG, of digital media.

In Ghana, funerals are important rituals and the families of the deceased often document these rites via digital media.

HFG's digital media project got off the ground with two training workshops in Ghana's capital Accra and the city of Tamale in northern Ghana. Trainees at the workshops were equipped with motion photography, editing and story generation skills. Subsequently, four DVDs (Digital Versatile/Video Disc) on breastfeeding, HIV/AIDS, immunization and diarrhoea have been produced in three widely spoken dialects – Dagbani, Twi and Ga. The DVDs have also been screened on road shows in communities where the three local dialects are spoken.

The production process regarding the DVD on breastfeeding illustrates the cycle all four DVDs went through.

First, a theme was selected for the film. In the Tamale vicinity, implementers of the project choose breastfeeding because of peculiar issues relating to breastfeeding in the locality; according to Arthur, it is a traditional practice in northern Ghana that nursing mothers are not supposed to feed their children with colostrum. Colostrum is the first milk that a nursing mother produces after birth.

Health experts catalogue a range of benefits from feeding the baby on colostrum. The list includes perfect nutrition tailored to the needs of the newborn to its immune factors.

According to the specialists colostrum has an important role to play in the baby's gastrointestinal tract. A newborn's intestines are very permeable. Colostrum seals the holes by "painting" the gastrointestinal tract with a barrier which mostly prevents foreign substances from penetrating and possibly sensitizing a baby to foods the mother has eaten.

Aside that Colostrum has a laxative effect on the baby, helping him pass his early stools, which aids in the excretion of excess bilirubin and helps prevent jaundice.

There were other issues in the Tamale locality relating on how nursing mothers positioned their feeding infants, and support male partners gave to their women when they gave birth.

A story board was produced in English when the breastfeeding theme was chosen. Local people were contracted to translate the storyboard into the local dialect—Dagbani. Consequently, indigenous speakers selected to act out the scenes of the storyboard, filmed, edited and transcribed on DVD formats.

There was a road show to screen the film after it was developed.

In Tamale, before the audience viewed the DVD on breastfeeding, their knowledge on that subject was measured in a survey. Their understanding of issues relating to breastfeeding was again evaluated after they viewed the film.

"From interviews from the survey the DVDs had made all the difference. Definitely people had gotten more knowledge on breastfeeding," says Arthur of the results of the survey.

She reasons that the audience retained the knowledge because the presentation was live, visual and in their language.

Arthur further lists the benefits that the community gained from the digital media project.

A significant number of children survived because their parents had increased their knowledge on health matters. Another major benefit was that the initiative made the work of community health workers easier— the shows served as a sort of entertainment to the community, thus the community gathered easily and were very open to discuss health issues after screening.

In spite of the positives, there were setbacks to the project. A major constraint to the project was funding. According to Arthur funding for the project was

structured in a manner that IICD was going to provide half of funds to implement project, while local counterparts bear the other half. None of the local development partners bought into the project after an extensive road show. "We approached a lot of people, but they all said they did not have a budget for it," Arthur says of the road show to find funding. HFG had to stretch the funds from IICD to implement the project.

Aside funding, technology was another setback implementers of the project had to contend with. Most of the communities that were beneficiaries or potential beneficiaries did not have electricity.

"The product is dependent on electricity, if the infrastructure (i.e. electricity) was there, we would have made a massive impact," Arthur says of how the lack of electricity impacted the project.

Also although trainees were enthusiastic about the skills they had acquired in digital media, access to such equipment is still difficult.

Ghana's health authorities recognize the role of ICT plays in health.

"The Government is committed to implementing a number of initiatives aimed at facilitating the widespread deployment and use of ICTs to support the activities and operations of rural health delivery systems throughout the country," it outlines in its policy statement.

A key objective of the policy will be to support dissemination of preventive information for the general public, and in particular for HIV/AIDS using ICT.

Other objectives of the initiative include improving the health status of the population while focusing on efforts on reducing inequalities in health and promoting the implementation of telemedicine applications within the health delivery system. Again the Ghana's health authorities plan to integrate and deploy ICTs in health program delivery with targets for health education, training and preventive detection.

While Ghanaian health providers plan to embed ICT in delivering health education to the Ghanaian public, the policy statement does not detail how it will be done; HFG digital media can serve as a prototype for the Ghanaian health authorities.

For further information contact the iConnect team: editor@iconnect-online.org

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