afyaBox: Connecting Tanzanians to Health Services

Improve Access to Health Services in the Moshi Municipal District by Integrating a User Friendly Mobile Application with the Health Facility Registry Database

BACKGROUND

As in many other developing countries, in Tanzania, information about health facilities - their locations and the services they offer - is either not available or hard to access by the general public. As a result, many people rely on past experience, word of mouth, or signboards outside the health facility to access such information. This restricts access to healthcare, especially when the need for less common or specialized services arises.

Signboards indicating location of the Health Facility

In 2016, the Government of Tanzania, in collaboration with PEPFAR, published a Health Facility Registry[1] (HFR), an online tool to provide public access to a database of health facilities – including their location and services offered - in Mainland Tanzania.

PROBLEM

Despite the importance of the HFR, the system operates in English, a language spoken by only one quarter of the Tanzanian population. Moreover, the information can only be accessed online, and the majority of Tanzanians, especially those living in rural areas, lack the hardware, connectivity, and experience necessary to access it. As a result, despite the existence of the HFR, many Tanzanians continue to rely on experience or word of mouth in locating healthcare.

SOLUTION

As a team of innovators who want to help our community, we want to use mobile technology

Most rural residents do not speak English and can only afford basic phones

to make HFR data available to anyone who has a mobile phone. By developing a mobile-based, user-friendly solution, any of the 40+ million Tanzanians with a mobile phone subscription – 80% of the population – will be able to access health facility information. Branded afyaBox ("afya" means "good health" in Swahili, the solution will provide equitable access to all mobile users, in English and Swahili.

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[1] http://hfrportal.ehealth.go.tz/

PROCESS

Users will be able to access health facility information by querying afyaBox though an Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) code. Sending a USSD request is as simple as making a phone call or sending a text message. The user dials the USSD code (e.g. *384*150#) and a series of prompts guide him/her through a menu to retrieve the desired information. To eliminate the language barrier, the afyaBox interface and database contents are available in both English and Swahili, and the simplicity of the menu will allow even those with low literacy to access the system. In addition to searching for health facilities by location, users will be able to search for the specific services they need or for facilities accepting health insurance.

The afyaBox team is piloting its project in the Moshi Municipal Council, where the system will be ready for launch as soon as the team acquires a USSD code from the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA). Having already applied for the code, the team is preparing to advertise the service to a wide range of users through mass media campaigns, posters, and social media.

EXPECTED IMPACT

Once afyaBox is deployed, it will improve the ability of Tanzanians in the Moshi Municipal Council to access to health services. More people will be able to access information from the HRF, allowing them to make informed decisions about where to seek medical care, including locating nearby facilities, insurance-accepting facilities, and specialty health services nearby.

KEY COLLABORATOR

The afyaBox team is based in Moshi and includes George Elly Matto, Makwani John Chimagu, Pascal Thadeus Msoka, and Thadei Melkiory Msumanje. The team received a $20,000 grant from the Data for Local Impact Innovation Challenge (DLIIC) in March 2017. With that grant and accompanying training and mentorship, they have developed afyaBox, which they expect will reach at least 200 people in the Moshi Municipal Council by the end of October 2017.

DLI is fostering data-driven innovations through small grant challenges for youth and entrepreneurs. DLI Identifies, networks and supports youth and entrepreneurs to create data-driven innovations for real life problems. To learn more, visit http://dliinnovationchallenge.com/

DCLI, a partnership between MCC and PEPFAR is enabling the use of data for better policies, programs, greater accountability and progress towards sustainable development goals.