Summary of Discussion Forum for Module 4 of mHealth4SRH training course

Two questions were posted to the discussion Forum on Tuesday 9th April 2013 at 12.00 noon. The session was scheduled to last for 24 hours, and it was closed on Wednesday. Several answers came after the Forum had closed. In total, 23 participants took part in the discussion.

In the first question, participants were asked, *"In order to evaluate mHealth initiatives, you would need collaboration of researchers. How would you go about getting them involved?"*

In response to this question, there were a number of recurrent ideas on how to find researchers to evaluate an mHealth project/initiative, including:

- Through advertising (4 participants);
- Through networking (4 participants);
- Through literature review/search (3 participants), e.g. using Pubmed.

In addition to this, participants responded with various ideas on not only getting researchers involved, but also carrying out the evaluations in general, such as:

- Contact the project managers of local mHealth projects, engage the ministry of health, and organize meetings to be attended by prospective researchers to discuss data collection instruments;
- Take into account the evaluation's purpose, and the mHealth initiative/project's goals and objectives. Consider who the researchers are – are they with NGOs, with funding agencies, or decision makers? Prepare a summary on the initiative (including information on its implementation methods, proposed M&E plan, indicators and expected outcome – as well as the objectives of the evaluation itself) to give researchers a clear idea of the evaluation's goals;
- Find experts in mHealth evaluation by looking around certain university departments (engineering, information science, biobehavioural sciences, and technology). Also peruse websites such as nih.gov in search of programme announcements/calls for proposals on evaluation of mHealth;
- Group researchers according to their area(s) of expertise; find people who have already been involved in mHealth in the country in order to benefit from their experience; speak with medical and technological students, as well as with people in the government;
- Find experts from both the technical and technological fields;
- Minimize bias by having independent researchers; have researchers from academia, as this would lower costs;
- Take into account several factors relating to the project (e.g. its target beneficiaries, feasibility, and ethical considerations). Understand which of the project's aspects will be evaluated, so as to be able to determine the type(s) of expertise required. Prospective researchers could be contacted via email and given a project summary, along with details on what their particular role and

responsibilities might be, then face to face meetings could be set up with those willing to participate;
- Take great care in forming the research team by setting selection criteria, then search for prospective researchers - both regionally and internationally - in research institutes, governmental (and non-governmental) bodies, etc.;
- Involve researchers and young professionals from universities, as well as consultants from other institutions.

Other ideas to ensure successful evaluation included the following:
- 3 participants mentioned the importance of using a multidisciplinary approach;
- 4 participants wrote about finding people involved in similar mHealth initiatives/projects in order to learn from them and share experiences;
- 3 participants noted the importance of involving the M&E research team from the very beginning of the project/initiative.

Several participants stressed the need for teamwork, and to do more than merely be in touch – as one participant noted, truly collaborating would mean having the team work as one, for a common cause.

While many participants cited how they would find researchers and/or certain things they would do when carrying out an evaluation, some gave more detailed accounts of how they would go about planning and implementing an mHealth evaluation. Excerpts from two such answers can be found below:

> "[…] Effective delivery of mHealth services require a multi-disciplinary approach such as those in Information, Communication & Technology (ICT), engineering, health, social sciences, education and even the legal sector (Government and Private).
>
> In evaluating mHealth initiatives, the first step is to get an inventory of existing initiatives as done in earlier modules, understanding the details of each of the initiatives, this inventory will assist in designing the Evaluation plan, assisting evaluators to know the research expertise that will be required for the evaluation processes. Details of projects can be obtained from project managers, implementers and beneficiaries.
>
> In getting the needed researchers involved, an advertorial may be necessary to intimate interested researchers about the M&E plans. Based on the response to the advertorial, selections are done based on past experiences of prospective researchers, skills they possess and can bring to the planned evaluation, after which stakeholders meetings are called to do macro and micro planning of the evaluation. It is important to note that both project managers and beneficiaries of such mHealth projects should be carried along in the evaluation plan for it to be all inclusive."

And,

> "[…] Before seeking for researchers, it is important to outline the following:

i. What aspects of the initiative need to be evaluated?
ii. Does it conform to set standards?
iii. Is it a truly valid project - meeting the objectives for which it was set up?
iv. Is it providing better results than previous non-mHealth initiatives for the same project?
v. Is the stage truly set for its introduction i.e. are other factors in place to prevent this initiative from being flawed?
vi. Are there experts to implement this initiative?

There could be a lot more questions to answer and they vary with the stage of the initiative - pre-process, process, output, or outcome. Once this is done, then the objectives for the particular evaluation exercise are set.

The objectives then determine the range of specialties/researchers that are needed for the evaluation of that initiative. These specialties should be outlined and weighted i.e. determine which specialties would be more useful so that in the face of limited funding priorities can be made in selection of the (most times) multi-disciplinary team. Then to go about procuring this team, the following methods could be adopted: Face-to-face visits, phone calls, emails, posted hardcopy letters, etc. These invitations should show in summary the objectives of the project and each individual researcher's own terms of reference; and a timeline for the assignment. They should then be given a deadline for accepting or otherwise rejecting the offer and an address (maybe email) to communicate their response to. Once the team is constituted, everyone should be given a letter of 'appointment' from the organising body and the plan for the meetings and a list of who else is on the team."

In the second question, participants were asked, *"What type of methodologies would you use in evaluation?"*

In response to this question, more than half of the participants (at least 12) mentioned the use of mixed methods – both qualitative and quantitative. It was noted that both have different strengths and weaknesses, and can therefore complement one another. One participant also noted that using both methodologies could provide insight into contextual factors relating to the project/initiative.

- More specifically, the following methods were mentioned:
  - Focus group discussions (10 participants; 3 of whom have already used or are currently using this method);
  - Key informant interviews (5 participants);
  - Surveys/questionnaires (5 participants);
  - Small group meetings (2 participants);
  - Case studies (2 participants);
  - Observations (2 participants);
  - Check lists (2 participants);
  - Desk reviews (2 participants);
- Other methods that were mentioned include: case-control studies (to evaluate impact), Delphi, Nominal Group Techniques, and Transect walks.

According to participants, the choice of specific methods would depend upon:

- The particular project/initiative, and each evaluation method's strengths and weaknesses (3 participants);
- Which part of the project/initiative is to be evaluated, and what the availabilities of resources and time are.

Generally speaking, participants mentioned taking several factors into account when planning an evaluation, including the project/initiative's

- Objectives (5 participants);
- Indicators (3 participants).

Aside from the participants who would use mixed methods, 2 participants said that they would choose whether to use qualitative, quantitative or both methodologies depending on the project.

- E.g., One participant's decision would depend upon the project's goals, objectives, methodology and indicators.

A few participants have participated or are currently participating in mHealth evaluation

- E.g., One participant is involved in the evaluation of an mHealth project in Ghana, using a case-control quasi-experimental design that is survey-based (and, in addition, focus groups).

Other comments included the following:

- One participant noted that for the process to be effective, stakeholders - from both the provider and beneficiary side - would need to be involved;
- One participant mentioned using both 'traditional' methods (e.g. interviews and focus groups) and 'new' methods (e.g. questionnaires to be filled out on computer, or web forms);
- It was noted that the evaluation method depends on the nature of the mHealth initiatives and whether one is looking at process indicators or impact indicators. The latter often involves cross-sectional studies using different data collection methods;
- One participant would conduct either a Randomized Control Trial to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of an mHealth initiative (the results of which could be used for scale up) or longitudinal surveys;
- One participant mentioned the usefulness of apps that automatically run analyses on the data they gather whilst being used.

Conclusion:

In this module's forum, participants gave a wide range of ideas relating to mHealth evaluation, and made efforts to go beyond repeating what had already been said, and bring new ideas to the table. The importance of collaborative efforts and involving of researchers was highlighted, as well as the need to do the evaluation based on the project objectives and in doing the evaluation, using many methods.