PfP LEARNING BRIEF

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USER-CENTRED DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITAL SOLUTIONS FOR THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN LESOTHO

NEED FOR DOCUMENTING LESSONS ON DIGITALISATION AND GBV PREVENTION

Digital solutions can catalyse development and play a key role in tackling various social and economic challenges, including poverty, health, education, gender equality, employment and climate change. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, draw greater attention to the importance of information and communication technologies for sustainable development and countries increasingly formulate strategies for digitalisation or digital mainstreaming.

Whilst mobile health interventions have demonstrated to be effective in improving health in a number of areas, there is a lack of research that identifies effective strategies for preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG) through mobile interventions[1]. A recent systematic review of smartphone-applications tackling gender-based violence (GBV) has shown that the minority of such apps reviewed was developed in Sub-Saharan Africa and by actors other than the private sector[2].

This learning brief documents lessons from the conceptualisation and development process of digital solutions to address VAWG in the Southern African country of Lesotho.

HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF DIGITAL SOLUTIONS FOR THE RESPONSE TO GBV

Mobile phones are wide-spread in Lesotho – with 78.7% of Lesotho residents owning a mobile phone. Among the 14 SADC countries, Lesotho is ranked fifth, having a mobile subscription rate of 100.94%. This figure does not represent unique subscribers, but the number of active SIM cards in the country and shows that one third of Lesotho residents owns more than one SIM card. Out of all mobile phone owners, 45% (that is 32% of the whole population) have access to a smart device[3].

In Southern Africa, VAWG is among the most severe and wide-spread human rights violations. The prevalence and acceptance of VAWG is high in international comparison. 86% of women in Lesotho have experienced GBV in their lifetime, and over 50% of women experienced Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)[4].

At the same time, studies show that less than 40% of women who experience violence seek help[5]. In Lesotho, many women are hesitant to report cases of violence to the police or public institutions. Instead, they tend to be more comfortable with sharing experiences or talking about VAWG within safe circles, or even anonymously. Making VAWG-related information and safe support circles easily accessible to women can support them to assert themselves against patriarchal gender norms and break free from perpetuated cycles of violence perpetrated against them.

[1] *Avis, W. R. (2017). Digital tools and changing behaviour in relation to violence against women. Helpdesk Research Report.*

[2] *Presentation by Claudia Garcia Moreno (2019). Sexual Violence Rights Initiative Forum.*

[3] *Lesotho Communications Authority (2017). The state of ICT in Lesotho. Retrieved from: https://researchictafrica.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2017_The-State-of-ICT-in-Lesotho_RIA_LCA.pdf (November 19, 2019)*

[4] *Gender Links (2014). Gender-Based Violence Indicators Study Lesotho. Retrieved from: http://genderlinks.org.za/wp-content/uploads/imported/articles/attachments/20068_final_gbv_ind_lesotho.pdf (November 19, 2019)*

[5] *United Nations Economic and Social Affairs (2015). The World's Women 2015, Trends and Statistics. Retrieved from: https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/worldswomen.html (November 19, 2019)*

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Partnerships for Prevention of violence against women and girls in Southern Africa

The regional programme 'Partnerships for Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls in Southern Africa (PfP)', implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), recognised this as an opportunity to develop technology-based mobile solutions that can support the prevention of VAWG.

Since beginning of 2018, PfP supports the 'Nokaneng'-flagship, an initiative that brings together government, non-governmental and private sector actors in Lesotho, and supports their joint efforts to reducing the acceptance of VAWG. In view of different groups of women accessing information differently, depending on their location and social status, 'Nokaneng' includes three components: Digital solutions, media and community-based interventions.

The digital component consists of two solutions – a smartphone app and a SMS-based solution – that facilitate easy access to edutainment content that informs and sensitises women about what constitutes violence, VAWG-related rights and services, safe support networks as protective measures (such as a panic button-function and alarm function) and virtual counselling. The aim of the digital solutions is preventive in that it seeks to sensitize women, stimulate conversation among women and build solidarity in order to help address VAWG. The links to services for survivors are added to provide an immediate response.

The smartphone app was officially launched by the Ministry of Gender of the Kingdom of Lesotho in January 2019 under the slogan 'Knowledge is power, power is protection'. Since then, the app was downloaded 1,200 times. Users posted 128 questions in the anonymous forum which were addresses with 179 responses from the Ministry of Gender, Youth, Sports and Recreation Lapeng Care Centre and members of the community. The SMS-based solution was launched in October 2019 and downloaded around 200 times within the first two weeks.

DESIGNING A PROTOTYPE AND IDENTIFYING THE USER GROUP

The idea – to provide women and girls with information, support and protection through a smartphone application – arose from the Participatory Initiative for Social Accountability (PISA), a EU- and German-funded programme for civic education in Lesotho, already in 2017. The idea was among the winners of the competition 'Empowerment of women through digital solutions', organised by the GIZ Sector Programme Gender Equality in 2017. With the prize money, PISA developed a prototype of the smartphone app in cooperation with the NGO Gender Links Lesotho and the IT-service provider Mainlevel Consulting AG.

The design process of the prototype was accompanied by community dialogue sessions to aid a sound understanding of the dynamics and norms around GBV in the selected test communities, as well as to sensitize community leaders about the process and its intentions and garner their support. Test workshops were conducted with 90 women from villages of three districts to identify risks and to provide a platform for feedback and future strategy development. In addition, the app was tested with female workers at a factory as well as with female students of the National University of Lesotho.

> *"When my husband saw the videos in the App, he saw his own abusive behaviour. It changed him. He has stopped hitting me."*
>
> **Married woman, Mpharane**

Test users pointed out that bilingual content in English and Sesotho and a virtual counselling service would be welcomed. Furthermore, build-in guidance on how to respond in situations of abuse, or the witnessing of abuse, and an emergency speed-dial button were recommended.

The pre-testing process showed that smartphone apps can only reach a specific group of users; younger urban women with higher IT-literacy skills and better access to smart devices and the internet. This informed the decision to develop a complementary feature phone solution. Lastly, the importance of physical and mental safety was highlighted by test users suggesting a discrete icon of the app to avoid violence based on the disclosure of the app use.

REFINING DIGITAL SOLUTIONS BY FOLLOWING A USER-CENTRED APPROACH

Based on insights from the prototype, the smartphone application was further developed to marketing stage and a complementary SMS-based solution was designed to reach women in rural areas. PfP commissioned the firm Mainlevel Consulting AG to conceptualise and (further) develop the two technology-based mobile solutions for women and girls:

International good practices (such as the Principles for Digital Development)[6] show that the benefits of digital solutions for supporting sustainable development processes unfold when people – not technologies – are at the centre of digitalisation. It is therefore important that technology is not seen as an end in itself, but as a means to capacitate people towards a specific purpose which, in the case of these mobile solutions is to support the change of social norms around VAWG.

[6] *The Principles for Digital Development are a set of guidelines for the use of technology in development projects. GIZ has endorsed these principles as good practice: https://digitalprinciples.org.*

Nokaneng Smartphone Application for Women:

The application provides women with audio-visual information on VAWG, support services and legal frameworks, a moderated peer-to-peer support forum as well as protective features. The app is accessible for Android-based smartphone users: **https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=ls.nokaneng.app&hl=en**

Nokaneng SMS-based application for women:

Complementing the smartphone application to increase reach to women with basic feature phones (i.e. providing text-based information as well as access to the support forum). The feature phone solutions is accessible for Vodacom Lesotho subscribers via the **short code 36677.**

Such a user-centred approach requires an agile process for conceptualising, developing and implementing digital solutions in close collaboration and regular exchange with the end-users. These three core phases of the process were complemented with capacity-building for local technical and IT partners and can be summarised in six operational steps (Table 1). The overall process was implemented in close collaboration with PfP Lesotho staff as well as governmental, non-governmental and private sectors actors.

TABLE 1: **– Implementation approach: Designing with and for the user**[7]

PHASES	Step	Description
Conceptualisation	**Assessment of actors, needs and resources**	• Identifying committed, suitable actors and their roles • Analysing the reality and needs of the user groups • Identifying required and available resources
Conceptualisation	**User-centred concept development**	• Participatory development of innovative solution ideas together with target groups and partners • Developing functional and technical concepts.
Realisation	**Agile development**	• Technical development of front- and back-end • Content development (in close collaboration with PfP and its local partners)
Realisation	**Implementation**	• Introduction to pilot users (incl. moderators) with mentoring support • Initialising the management and administration structure • Roll out and initial upscaling (for mobile solution 1)
Sustainability	**M&E for learning and adaptation**	• Setting up a simple process for progress monitoring • Evaluating results for learning and adaptation
Sustainability	**Capacity development, partnerships & handover**	• Capacity building for sustainable maintenance • Investing in strategic partnerships • Handing over the management and administration

[7] *Final Report – Development and management of technology-based mobile solutions for the prevention of violence against women and girls. Mainlevel Consulting AG (2019).*

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

1 Women are most comfortable sharing experiences anonymously

Testing sessions of the first prototype showed that women are most comfortable with sharing experiences or inquiring about VAWG within safe circles or anonymously. In order to guarantee anonymity, the smartphone app does not include any log-in function and follows high data protection standards. It does not collect any personal data from women and girls and complies with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The name 'Nokaneng' and design of the app icon does not reveal the content of the app. This protects women and girls from revealing that they are seeking help to external or unsolicited users of their smartphones.

2 Digital solutions are no panacea: They don't change social norms – people do.

With digitalisation being a buzzword, there is a danger of what is sometimes called 'solutionism', i.e. the tendency to assume that a digital solution will somehow help solve whichever challenge or issue it is developed for. If not managed well, this can become a source if disillusionment. Therefore, it has been important to clearly manage expectations both among partners and PfP colleagues as to what digital solutions can achieve – and what they cannot. Digital solutions will not change social norms – they can, at best, support people to reflect and discuss attitudes and behaviours. Hence, what is required is a people first approach to build solutions that meet actual needs.

3 Agile development is a valuable methodology for inclusive, transparent implementation

The agile process was important for efficiently and effectively planning all tasks related to the development of the mobile solutions – especially because the exact scope of these solutions was to be defined as first step. Agile development, e.g. weekly updates, was helpful ensuring different processes and steps for feature and content development stay aligned. Importantly, every step in the agile process – from user-centred concept development to agile development and user testing – has been crucial for the success of the solutions. Hence it became clear that there are no short-cuts to implement digital solutions well.

4 User-centred development is crucial – but needs trainings and patience

User-centred development of the features and content of the mobile solutions is important for ensuring that they meet local needs and are adapted to the digital literacy of the target group (e.g. type of solution, which device are needed).

User-centredness already begins at conceptual stage with and the choice of which digital solution to implement (or whether to implement a digital solution at all) needs to be grounded in thorough user research. It also means involving different cohorts of target users throughout the agile development process. This is important for anticipating bottle-necks early-on and work around them – but it requires patience and there are no short-cuts for a people-first approach.

The process of user-centred development and testing is quite different to approaches followed in development cooperation. Hence, it is important to include time for training all involved partners in in these new skills and approaches. Particularly, the process of drafting, validating (e.g. with target users) and finalising content can be very time-consuming. Hence it is worthwhile to bring on board a local content manager early on, who is well familiar with the topic that the solution addresses. This helps ensuring the content is suitable and understandable.

6 For new digital solutions based on hypotheses – invest in and learn from prototypes

Prototyping has proven to be a valuable step of thorough context and user research. It helps to check assumptions regarding the suitability of digital solutions, their features and content based on thorough user testing and research. In addition, prototyping helps ease the cost of development time and resources.

7 Invest in partnerships and capacitate stakeholders for sustaining the digital solutions

It is important to invest in stakeholder engagement from the start with the aim to (a) create trust; (b) engage then throughout the process; and (c) elicit contributions. The involvement of key stakeholders is important for preparing the grounds for the future management, promotion and sustainability of the mobile solutions. An assessment of partners' capacities is a precondition to making best use of their comparative strengths.

The successful hand-over of a piloted digital solution to a local partner requires (a) their high interest, willingness and thematic suitability to maintain the digital solution; (b) their digital skills and a thorough understanding of the functions and features of the digital solutions; and (c) a funding plan for its maintenance. A transition period allows to strengthen digital capacities prior to hand-over.

For the sustainable, local maintenance and future improvement of the mobile solutions, it is important to work closely with a local IT partner. This can be done through a service provider agreement between international and local IT experts from as soon as from conceptualisation of the mobile solution.

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