e-Mahtari – Improving Maternal Healthcare in Rural India through Information and Communication Technologies

Full paper

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Abstract

People living in rural areas in developing nations have limited access to quality healthcare. According to a recent United Nations report, most developing nations will not reach their millennium development goals related to maternal and child care. Lack of infrastructure creates a challenge in deploying information and communication technologies (ICT) to extend the reach of healthcare to rural areas. This study reports on a successful implementation of a low cost innovative mobile phone-based health information system to improve maternal and child care in rural India. A case study research method was used with the *Practice Lens* providing the theoretical framework for the investigation. The findings enrich the ICT for development (ICT4D) literature, and inform health policy makers and technology designers interested in creating innovative solutions to healthcare problems in resource-starved regions of the world.

Keywords

Health Information Systems, Global Health, ICT for Development, ICT4D, Practice Lens, Maternal and Child Care

Introduction

Access to quality healthcare is a basic necessity all over the world. It is all the more critical for the growth of developing nations. Therefore, it is not surprising that three out of the eight millennium development goals (MDGs) set by the United Nations to eradicate extreme poverty worldwide pertain to healthcare (UN 2013). These are MDG 4: Reduce child mortality, MDG5: Improve maternal health, and MDG 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. According to the latest report published by the Government of India, the country is not on track to meet either MDG 4 or MDG 5 (GOI 2015). Despite India's impressive economic growth in the last decade, access to quality healthcare continues to be limited. Furthermore, there is wide disparity between the qualities of healthcare available in urban and rural India (Das et al. 2012; Sachan 2013). This inequality is attributed to a lack of healthcare infrastructure, including qualified healthcare professionals, in rural India (Dasgupta 2013). Considering the fact that of the 1.2 billion people living in India, 2 out of 3 live in rural areas (Chandramouli 2013), improving access to quality healthcare in rural areas is essential to closing the gap between MDG targets and achievement.

Lack of access to quality healthcare in rural areas is not unique to India; rather it is a global phenomenon affecting many nations, from Africa (Mengiste 2013, Bedeley and Palvia 2014) to South America (Miscione 2007). Information and communication technologies (ICT) have been proposed as a solution to expanding the reach of quality healthcare in developing countries (Khajoueenejad and McCarthy, 2006). For example, telemedicine has been used to enable patients in remote locations to consult with specialist physicians (Hailemariam et al. 2010) and health information systems have been deployed to capture population data that have been used to make informed decisions regarding public health

(Abouzhar and Boerma 2005). However, rural areas in developing economies offer numerous infrastructural and social challenges that make it difficult to successfully deploy and sustain ICT based initiatives (Braa et al. 2004; Wouters et al. 2009). Mengiste (2013), based on an analysis of the implementation of computerized health information systems in Ethiopia, identifies three categories of challenges: (1) infrastructure related, (2) human resources related, and (3) healthcare system structure related. Rural areas lack the technological infrastructure, including, electricity and network connectivity, that are essential to deploy ICT-based initiatives. There is also the need for a technically skilled work force to maintain and manage the ICT-based systems. Since urban areas offer higher living standards and better opportunities for career advancement, technically skilled workers prefer to live in urban areas. This poses a challenge to locate skilled technicians in rural areas to maintain ICT-based infrastructure. Finally, a hierarchical and centralized healthcare system that leaves little scope for local adaptation adds further challenges to the implementation of healthcare information systems.

In this report we use a sociotechnical perspective (Orlikowski 2000) to investigate how the Chhattisgarh state in India successfully rolled out e-Mahtari, an innovative ICT-based solution, to improve maternal healthcare in its rural areas. Considering the numerous challenges faced in implementing ICT in rural areas of developing nations and the concern about high failure rates of such implementations (Heeks 2002; Ali and Bailur 2007), this study makes a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge on information technology for development (IT4D). It also informs donor institutions, governmental organizations, and policy makers on low cost innovative IT strategies to improve healthcare in resource-starved regions around the world.

The remaining of the paper is organized as follows. The next section provides context to the study by presenting background information on the rural health sector in India. The research method and the theoretical foundation of the study are also discussed in this section. It is followed by a description of the e-Mahtari system. The results of e-Mahtari implementation are then presented and lessons learned for ICT use in healthcare in resource-starved regions are highlighted. Finally, the paper is concluded with limitations and directions for future research.

Research Context and Methodology

This study was conducted in the state of Chhattisgarh, a land locked state located in central India with an area of about 52,000 sq. miles (135,000 sq. kms) and a population of 25.5 million, according to the 2011 census. 77% of the state's population lives in rural areas. The project to improve maternal healthcare in rural Chhattisgarh was a joint initiative involving several national and state agencies. It was funded by the Government of India through the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). The NRHM, a federal government agency, plays a key role in coordinating and funding rural health initiatives in India (Nandan 2010). The Department of Health and Family Welfare of the state Government of Chhattisgarh was responsible for policy development, and program implementation. The application software was developed by the National Informatics Center (NIC) of India, and BSNL, a public sector telecommunication company in India, provided the telecommunication infrastructure. The next section provides a brief introduction to rural healthcare delivery in India.

Rural Healthcare System in India

The rural healthcare service in India is organized using a 3-tier system, as shown in Figure 1 (Dasgupta 2013). The Sub Health Center is the first level of contact between the patient and the health services. It is manned by a male health worker and an auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM) or a female health worker. Each sub center caters to the need of about 5 to 10 villages. The primary health center (PHC) is headed by a qualified medical doctor, and acts as a referral unit for 10 to 15 sub centers. It also operates a small inpatient unit. The community health center (CHC), with a 30 bed hospital, offers specialized services and acts as a referral unit for 12 to 15 PHCs.

In this setting, the ANM plays a key role by acting as the face of the health services to the community (Malik 2009). She is the field level worker who implements the programs and policies of NRHM. Her responsibilities include providing maternal and child care, conducting child delivery, immunization of children, treatment of minor ailments and referral services, organizing health and nutrition days, and training and supervising Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs). ASHAs are community health workers, whose primary responsibility is to promote maternal and child care (Liu et al. 2011). They provide antenatal care to pregnant women and receive incentives to promote institutional delivery by accompanying the expectant mother to a medical facility. Thus, ANMs are greatly responsible for realizing the MDG goals by helping lower infant mortality rate (IMR) and maternal mortality rate (MMR).

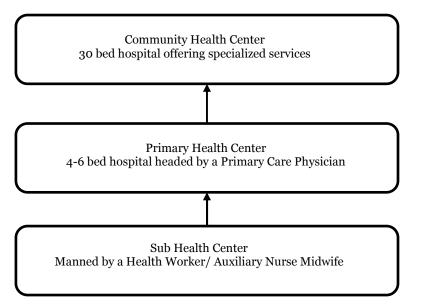


Figure 1. Rural Healthcare System in India (adapted from Dasgupta 2013)

The hierarchical structure of the rural healthcare system creates a bottleneck in information flow, which poses a challenge to realizing MDGs. ANMs deliver care, and collect data about maternal and child health. These data are aggregated at the PHC and CHC levels, and reported to state health administrators, who use this information to formulate healthcare policies. These policies are then translated into action plans and instructions flow down the hierarchy to the ANM for implementation. This process is error prone and time consuming. Absence of reliable and timely data about the impact of healthcare initiatives creates difficulties in making operational as well as strategic decisions and impedes implementation of appropriate interventions.

The e-Mahtari system is designed to facilitate the flow of information between the field level workers and the health administrators at the district and the state levels. ANMs are its primary users. It simplifies their jobs by providing them with a platform for communication, coordination, and information management. It enables them to collect real time data on public health that feed the program monitoring systems of the state and national health services. Thus, e-Mahtari is expected to play a key role in improving maternal and childcare in Chhattisgarh.

Research Method and Theoretical Foundation

We used the case study research method to investigate the implementation of e-Mahtari. This is an appropriate research method to get a deeper insight into a contemporary phenomenon (Yin 2014). This method is also widely used by researchers to investigate ICT in developing countries (Walsham and Sahay

2006). Due to the complexity of investigating the role of ICT in national development and the novelty of the e-Mahtari program, we considered it the right research method for this study.

Our investigation focused on the implementation of e-Mahtari in Dhamtari district of Chhattisgarh, where it was first piloted. Data were collected from multiple sources. Key personnel responsible for program management were the primary source of data about the project. These included representatives of the technology team, field level officers in charge of e-Mahtari implementation, and senior government officers. Data were gathered through briefings, discussions, and interviews. Published reports by governmental agencies and news reports from the press offered additional sources of information. Data collection was initiated by the first author during a field visit to India in the summer of 2013. The second author continued to gather additional data during fall 2013. Following the recommendation of Yin (2014), data collected from different sources were validated through triangulation.

The practice lens proposed by Orlikowski (2000) provided the theoretical foundation for our investigation. According to Orlikowski (2000), technology use is not predetermined by the set of design criteria embodied in the technology but evolve through repetitive use by humans in an organizational and/or social setting. It is well known that users often use technology in ways that were not anticipated by its designers. How the user uses a technology is strongly influenced by his/her understanding of the technology features as well as the work practices of the environment. While the design decisions made by the designer may restrict how a technology is used, by no means do they dictate technology usage by the end-users. As the users use the technology to accomplish their jobs, they may come up with new ways to use it that were not anticipated by the designer. Such workarounds may have good or bad consequences (Harrison et al. 2007). For example, a second address line in a customer database may be repurposed to store the contact email address of the customer when the system does not provide a data field to store such information. Similarly, timed session termination, a critical security feature in many healthcare applications, may be bypassed by colluding with a coworker who would move the cursor from time to time when the original user is away from his/her desk. Repurposing the second address line enhances the value of the application to the organization whereas bypassing the security feature has negative consequences for overall privacy and security. Technology-in-practice, as illustrated by these two examples, evolves through repeated interactions between the technology and its users, and could be very different from the designer's original intention of how technology was meant to be used. Such differences between design and use could arise due to various reasons, including, cultural differences between the design team and user communities (Walsham and Sahay 1999), inadequate accommodation of local needs (Braa et al. 2007), or, simply from a desire to subvert the system. These emergent differences between the intended use of technology and technology-in-practice have implications for successful technology implementation. The practice lens provides a useful framework to study the implementation of e-Mahtari. The next section presents an overview of the e-Mahtari system.

e-Mahtari – Mother and Child Tracking System (MCTS)

The goal of the e-Mahtari project was to improve maternal and child care in rural areas. As mentioned earlier, the ANM is in the frontline of the rural healthcare system in India, and is the primary contact between the healthcare system and its beneficiaries. The goal of the project was to provide information support to the ANM in performing her day-to-day job, and to collect field data in real time to be used by health administrators to facilitate performance monitoring and policy formulation.

Rural India lacks adequate infrastructure to support personal computer based health information systems. Furthermore, these systems tend to be expensive and require technically skilled man power for day-to-day operation and maintenance. Skilled man power is highly scarce in rural India. Interestingly, mobile phone technology is widely used in India, with 53.2% of the population owning a mobile phone,

according to the 2011 census (BBC News 2012). Mobile phones, thus, offer a low cost alternative to personal computer based systems. Taking advantage of the widespread use of mobile phones in rural India, the e-Mahtari system employs a mobile phone based interface in the local language (Hindi) for use by the ANM. It also has the capability to send reminders to the mobile phones of the beneficiaries of the rural health system, namely, the expectant mothers.

An overview of the information flow in the e-Mahtari system is shown in Figure 2. A centralized database acts as a repository to store health information. ANMs are the primary users of the system. Other users include health administration officials, and expectant mothers and their families. The ANM uses the mobile phone interface to register pregnant women (beneficiaries) and make changes to beneficiary records. She also uses it to capture information about antenatal care (ANC) and postnatal care (PNC) visits, deliveries and/or termination of pregnancies, maintain vaccination records of children, and report deaths of women and children under her care and break out of epidemics in her assigned territory. The system also enables the ANM to report equipment breakdowns and place requests for medication. The ANM relies on a job chart to plan her activities. Prior to the implementation of e-Mahtari, she planned her activities based on a paper copy of the monthly job chart supplied by the health department. The printed report was often outdated by the time it was received by the ANM and, therefore, was not very helpful. With the implementation of e-Mahtari, the updated job chart is always readily available on her mobile phone. This greatly simplified planning her activities.

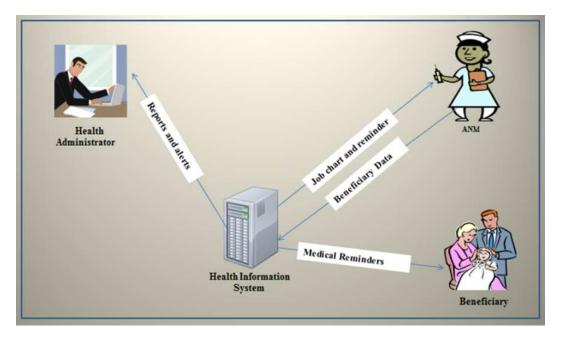


Figure 2. e-Mahtari Information Flow

The system sends reminders to the beneficiary's mobile phone alerting her about her ANC/PNC visits and vaccination for her child. Health administration officials at various levels in the state government have ready access to up-to-date information about the healthcare system and can effectively monitor performance of their subordinates. The system also alerts appropriate health administrators in the event of an epidemic breakout.

At the time of our investigation the roll out of the e-Mahtari project in Dhamtari district involving 165 ANMs had been successfully completed. A one day training program was conducted to familiarize the users prior to the system implementation. The benefits of the system and the lessons learned are

discussed in the next section. As will be seen, some of these benefits accrued due to planning at the time of system design, but there were other benefits that were realized because of unanticipated ways in which the system was used in practice. Additionally, there were detrimental workarounds created by some end users, and the system design as well as usage policies evolved to curb such practices.

Findings and Discussion

Implementation success is a major concern in ICT4D projects. It is, therefore, critical to study implementation success of such projects and learn from these experiences. e-Mahtari greatly simplified the job of the ANM and improved management reporting for health administrators. By replacing a paperbased system with a real time data management system, it created benefits for all stakeholders. Prior to the implementation of e-Mahtari, the ANMs filled out large volumes of paper documents to register beneficiaries and report their health statuses. These were sent to the block level office for data entry and management reporting. This process was error prone and often resulted in long delays from several weeks to several months to compile field data. As a result, senior health administrators found it difficult to effectively monitor the health of the healthcare system. Access to timely data about program effectiveness is critical to measure and monitor the impact of policy initiatives and take appropriate action. This was one of the key design goals of e-Mahtari.

Following the implementation of e-Mahtari, the time for data collection and reporting from the field has been reduced to less than a week for 67% of the incidents. The goal is to report 95% or more of field data within a week's time. Data entry using mobile phones not only reduced the reporting time but also significantly lowered reporting errors through proper data validation. The paper reports filled by ANMs prior to e-Mahtari implementation often had many mandatory fields left blank. e-Mahtari enforces data entry for all mandatory fields and performs appropriate data validation for all fields. This significantly improved the quality of reported data, and raised the confidence of health administrators on health data collected through e-Mahtari. Additionally, analytical tools made it easier to perform ad hoc analysis of health data to support management decisions and design timely interventions. Elimination of paper documents also resulted in significant savings by reducing stationery and mailing costs.

In the old system, ANMs spent excessive amount of time filling out paper documents in their offices. Thus, they had less time available for their main job, namely, providing care to pregnant women and children in the villages. With the mobile phone becoming their primary source of information about their work schedules as well as the tool for data collection and reporting, now they could spend more time taking care of their patients.

In the past ANMs had to meet in a central location, such as a block headquarters on a weekly or a fortnightly basis to receive instructions from health administrators. These visits have been reduced to once a month as instructions are now sent directly to their mobile phones through e-Mahtari. Messages can be communicated to ANMs in real time, even when they are away visiting patients in the villages.

The reminder/ alert system of e-Mahtari is used to send reminders to pregnant women and ASHA regarding checkups, ANC, PNC, and immunization. This has resulted in improved compliance and better delivery of care. Similarly, reminders to ANMs regarding checks to be performed and automatic escalation in case of nonperformance also ensures that patients receive timely care.

The above mentioned benefits were a direct outcome of good system design and implementation. However, there were unplanned side effects that resulted from how the system was used in practice. A significant benefit in this category was improved monitoring of field-level health workers. With their mobile phones becoming their official communication system, the ANMs' work could be monitored by administrators at all times. Excuses by field level staff regarding non-receipt of instruction became a thing of the past because of time stamped delivery of reports generated by the system. The improved monitoring of field staff, though not appreciated by all, certainly resulted in a more efficient and effective healthcare system. A similar side benefit of improved monitoring has also been reported in (Miscione 2007), in the context of implementation of telemedicine systems in Peru.

Some ANMs came up with an innovative workaround to subvert the system. They entered false data in line with the "expectation", instead of actually visiting the patients in the villages. Input of such false data compromise the integrity of the system and has serious impact on data quality. It is, therefore, imperative to evolve the system design to prevent such practices. One option that is being considered is to collect location information at the time of data entry through the GPS system. While this may not guarantee data accuracy, it will at least verify the location of data collection.

An unanticipated barrier to adoption of the e-Mahtari system, though not very widespread, stems from cultural resistance among certain groups in rural areas to the use of hi-tech gadgets by women. High tech gadget use by women is perceived to disrupt the "balance" of power between the genders, and is unfavorably viewed by the men folks.

e-Mahtari implementation in Dhamtari district is considered a success by health administrators in Chhattisgarh. The system is now being extended to other districts using a phased implementation strategy. A key success factor, according to the technology team, was the choice of mobile phone technology as the platform for implementation. This overcame the lack of broadband communication infrastructure in rural India. Furthermore, there was no need to deploy skilled personnel in rural areas to manage and maintain IT infrastructure. This strategy also took advantage of the widespread ownership of mobile phones in the rural population and enhanced the reach of e-Mahtari among pregnant women and children in rural India.

According to a recent United Nations report, there are 6 billion mobile phones in use worldwide by its 7 billion people (Worstall 2013). This widespread use of mobile technology creates an opportunity to implement mobile phone based health information systems in resource starved regions around the globe. e-Mahtari system can serve as a model for developing such information systems. While e-Mahtari proved the viability of using mobile phone-based technology as the backbone of the rural health information system in India, one must keep in mind that the technology platform was effective only in the context of the environment, comprising of its people, organizational structure, culture, practices and policies. Thus, adaptation of the system to other environments must be carefully planned and executed by taking into consideration the local needs in order to reap the full benefit.

Conclusion

This report described e-Mahtari, an innovative low cost mobile phone-based health information system, which has been successfully implemented in Chhattisgarh state of India to improve maternal healthcare. A case study research method was used to investigate the implementation through a practice lens. Successful implementation of e-Mahtari demonstrates the viability of mobile phone based technology in ICT implementation in resource starved areas. Aside from discussing the benefits resulting from system implementation, the study also highlights both positive and negative workarounds, a result of technology-in-practice, ensuing from innovative use of the system by its end-users. System designers and program managers need to be aware of such side effects of technology implementation, and take proactive actions to promote beneficial use while limiting negative consequences of workarounds.

One of the limitations of our study is that it investigated the implementation of e-Mahtari in one district of the state. So, it is too early to draw conclusions about the scalability of the program. Also, evaluating how well the system helps the government realize the millennium development goals regarding maternal and child health will provide an objective assessment of system success. Such assessment must wait until the system is implemented throughout the state and is widely used. As the program is expanded to other parts of the state we plan to use action research method to continue our investigation.

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