Digital Interventions: Documenting Process, Enabling Environment, Challenges, and Learning

USAID Adolescent Reproductive Health (ARH) Program

Digital Co-Design Session, Surkhet, Nepal

Program Snapshot

Life of Project: 2022 – 2025

Geographic Focus: 60 municipalities across 11 districts in 3 provinces: Madhesh (41), Lumbini (12), Karnali (7)

Prime Partners: CARE Nepal

Consortium Partners: Howard Delafield International (HDI), Jhpiego, Associations of Youth Networks of Nepal (AYON), Nepal Contraceptive Retail Sales (NCRS) Company

Digital Partners: Social Awareness Center Nepal (Surkhet), Dalit Development Society (Salyan), Rural Development and Awareness Society Nepal (Rolpa), BEE Group (Banke), Mallarani Rural Development Concern Center (Pyuthan), Aasaman Nepal (Dhanusha), CNRD (Rautahat), Bagmati Welfare Society Nepal (Sarlahi), Divya Development Resource Centre (Parsa), Protection Nepal (Bara), Ratauli Yuba Club (Mahottari)

About the Program

USAID Adolescent Reproductive Health (ARH) was a three-year (initially five year), USAID-funded project led by CARE Nepal in partnership with HDI, Jhpiego, AYON, and Nepal CRS Company from 2022 to 2025. The project supported the Government of Nepal (GoN) in improving adolescents' reproductive health with the goal of empowering adolescents (10-19 years) to reach their full potential and practice healthy reproductive behaviors. To achieve these goals, USAID ARH employed multichannel social and behavior change strategies, including group-based interventions, interpersonal communication, and youth- and girl-led activism for reproductive health and social norms change, supported by service linkages amplified by digital interventions.

The Government of Nepal launched the National Adolescent Health and Development Strategy in 2018 to address key issues identified in the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey, particularly the high rates of adolescent marriage and pregnancy. The strategy underscores the critical need to create an environment that promotes healthy reproductive health practices among adolescents. In 2022, the GoN reinforced this effort by endorsing the Adolescent-Friendly Reproductive Health Services Guidelines. Aligned with these national initiatives, USAID ARH collaborated with federal, provincial, and municipal governments in Madhesh, Lumbini, and Karnali Provinces to improve the reproductive health of adolescents aged 10-19, with a focus on disadvantaged populations.

Digital Intervention

Engagement strategies for adolescents in Nepal have evolved dramatically over the years. Traditional media such as TV, radio, FM, and in-person outreach, once considered the mainstays for reaching target audiences, have become increasingly outdated due to their high costs and logistical complexities. In contrast, mobile phones have emerged as the most preferred and accessible communication medium, particularly among the youth. With over 90% of adolescents in urban and peri-urban areas having access to mobile devices and internet penetration exceeding 55% nationwide, the digital landscape offers unparalleled opportunities for outreach. Mobile applications, social media platforms, and gamified educational tools are now transforming the delivery of health and empowerment messages, providing interactive, cost-efficient, and scalable solutions tailored to the digital habits of adolescents. This paradigm shift enables a broader reach and personalized, real-time engagement, making digital platforms the cornerstone of efforts to empower Nepal's young population and foster a well-informed and resilient future generation.

The digital intervention, piloted by the ARH project for the first time in Nepal, clearly demonstrated its potential to succeed not only in addressing ARH issues but also as a model for future projects aimed at effectively engaging youth in Nepal and South Asia.

What did we do?

In 60 municipalities across Madhesh, Lumbini, and Karnali Provinces, USAID ARH focused targeted interventions. Digital innovation interventions included:
- **kikikuka.com Web Portal:** An online platform offering information on a variety of topics, such as safety, relationships, sexual health, and connecting adolescents with youth-friendly services.
- **Girls' Hostel Interactive Digital Game:** A gamified tool that helps adolescent girls practice decision-making and learn about family planning and reproductive health.
- **@ThatGirlEkta Virtual Influencer Campaign:** This campaign used a virtual influencer on social media to deliver engaging reproductive health messages and drive youth to digital resources.
- **Digit on Wheels (DoW):** A mobile outreach program that brought digital tools and educational sessions to rural communities, bridging the digital divide.

Collaboration with public and private partners, including the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) and organizations like WorldLink and E-sewa, ensured the sustainability and impact of these initiatives. These public-private partnerships enhanced the reach and effectiveness of digital interventions, fostering trust and credibility for long-term success. Ultimately, the program is intended to adapt to the evolving needs of adolescents, empowering them to become informed, confident, and healthy individuals in Nepal.

The following steps were followed systematically in developing digital products:

1) **Formative Research:** Formative research included baseline studies and focus group discussions to assess the feasibility of the game and examine push-pull conflicts, including motivators and barriers. The findings were used to derive key learning objectives and messages for the project.

2) **Desk Review (2022):** In 2022, a desk review was conducted to collect secondary data on mobile connections, internet connectivity, and phone access among adolescents in Nepal. The review also explored social media usage and primary sources of local news and information, compiling the findings into a comprehensive report to guide initial project planning.

3) **Media and Creative Research:** Subsequent media and creative research analyzed the media consumption patterns of adolescents. Three game concepts were developed and tested using audio-visual stimuli, with insights gathered from the target audience to refine and finalize the concepts.

4) **Playbook Compilation:** All research findings, learning objectives, product strategies, and implementation guidelines were consolidated into a detailed playbook. This playbook served as a reference document to ensure scalability and consistency during implementation.

5) **Co-Design with Target Audience:** Co-design sessions were conducted with the target audience in collaboration with a research agency. These sessions involved testing and refining creative components such as game scripts, prototypes for knowledge games, and the suitability of language and comprehension levels.

6) **Strategic Allocation Across Products:** The learning objectives and messages were strategically distributed across three products to maximize engagement, scalability, and audience reach. These products included an immersive game for deep engagement, a website as a self-learning platform, and a virtual influencer delivering interactive content on social media**.**

7) **Legal Document Creation:** Legal documents were drafted and finalized to ensure compliance with Nepalese data privacy and security laws. This included creating a Privacy Policy, Terms of Service, and conducting a comprehensive legal assessment of the game to align with digital content, cybersecurity, and data protection regulations of Nepal.

8) **Development Phase:** During the development phase, detailing the storyline, scripts, and gameplay mechanics was done based on the structured playbook for the game. Animated assets, stories, scripts, and music were designed to enrich the gaming experience.

9) **Soft Product Releases:** Finally, the product release phase saw the release of the *Girls Hostel* game app on the Google Play Store, along with the game prologue and *kikicrush*. Additionally, the virtual influencer campaign and website were launched to engage the audience and ensure accessibility. Additionally, orientation sessions were held with ground staff on how to operate and facilitate the tools with adolescents in the field.

10) **Marketing and Promotion:** A comprehensive marketing plan was developed and implemented to drive the adoption and engagement of all digital products. This plan included targeted outreach strategies designed to maximize the reach and impact of the initiatives, ensuring widespread awareness and user participation.

What were the enabling factors?

1. **Extensive Adolescent Network**: The project leveraged a robust network of over 54,000 adolescents established in partnership with 11 NGOs and a dedicated provincial team. This vast structure ensured targeted outreach and widespread engagement, making the intervention impactful on a

large scale. Until today, 68 SAA sessions with digital interventions as a part have been reported from the field.
2. **Broad Mobile Access**: 16% of adolescent girls in ARH program areas own mobile phones, while more than 55% of adolescent girls in ARH program areas have access to phones. This extended access significantly amplified the reach of digital tools and platforms, ensuring more adolescents could engage with the intervention. (Source: media habits and consumption report for ARH)
3. **Participatory Content Development**: The co-design process was instrumental in developing relatable characters and stories for gamified tools and educational content. By involving adolescents in this process, the intervention created narratives that resonated deeply with the target audience, fostering meaningful engagement and ensuring the content's relevance.

These enabling factors combined to create an ecosystem that effectively harnessed digital technologies, resulting in immediate and impactful outcomes for adolescent health and empowerment.

What were the challenges?

1. **Android Version Compatibility**: A significant challenge was aligning the game's compatibility with the Android versions commonly used by the target audience. Initially, the game was uploaded to Android version 11 to maximize coverage among disadvantaged groups. However, the market share of Android "research" revealed that only 3.9% of the population used Android 9 or higher, and many adolescents in the SAA group (mostly out-of-school) could not download the game. This necessitated revising the strategy to make the game compatible with lower Android versions, ensuring broader accessibility.
   - ❖ Other challenges included compatibility with older phone models, a need for more knowledge about upgrading devices, and limited promotion plans for digital products during the initial phases.
2. **Limited Language Options**: Due to resource constraints, the digital products primarily used Nepali, with local dialects integrated into some social media platforms. While this approach served a significant portion of the audience, it became evident that offering the products in multiple languages would have enhanced inclusivity and engagement across diverse linguistic groups.
3. **Promotion Strategies**: Initially, it was assumed that digital media alone would suffice to promote digital products. However, it became clear that digital media and traditional outreach methods were needed to educate the audience about using and benefiting from digital tools. This realization led to the launch of the "Digit on Wheel" initiative, designed to reach a larger audience effectively.
4. **Coordination and collaboration with the government:** As digital products are a new area, identifying the appropriate ministry and department to support various areas was challenging. As digital innovation cuts across disciplines, identifying the direct counterparts was often difficult.

These challenges highlight the importance of technological and linguistic inclusivity, as well as the need for well-rounded and proactive promotion strategies in designing digital interventions for diverse and disadvantaged populations.

What did we learn?

While implementing this approach, we identified several critical insights that can inform and refine future strategies. These learnings include:
1. **Hybrid Strategies for Broader Reach**
   Combining digital and traditional approaches is essential to effectively reach Nepal's most underserved populations. Leveraging both methods ensures inclusivity, bridges the digital divide, and addresses diverse audience needs.
2. **Building Digital Readiness**
   As the digital landscape evolves rapidly, preparing the population to engage with digital media is

crucial. This involves introducing digital tools and fostering familiarity and comfort with their use to ensure a smooth transition as digital approaches gain prominence.

3. **Reusable Digital Assets for Development**
   Digital resources, such as virtual influencers like Ekta, Namita, Tina, and Sumi, hold value beyond specific projects like ARH. These versatile assets can be adapted for broader applications in Nepal's development sector, enhancing resource efficiency and impact.

4. **Capacity Building for Stakeholders**
   Educating stakeholders on the digital approach is vital for informed decision-making. By equipping them with the knowledge and skills to understand and contribute to digital strategies, stakeholders can provide valuable input and help ensure initiatives are well-informed and contextually appropriate.

5. **Sustainability Through Integration**
   Integrating digital approaches into broader development frameworks and adaptation by private sector partners promotes sustainability. By positioning digital tools as central to ongoing initiatives, we create opportunities for long-term impact and innovation.

These learnings underscore the importance of inclusivity, preparedness, and stakeholder engagement in successfully implementing and sustaining hybrid digital-traditional strategies.

Way Forward

The program envisions a strategic and comprehensive approach to expand the impact of digital interventions, ensuring they reach their intended targets while generating broader societal benefits. Recognizing the potential of digital platforms, the way forward focuses on raising high awareness among target populations by leveraging digital, social media, and outreach strategies. This multifaceted approach ensures targeted engagement and creates a ripple effect, reaching adolescents nationwide as an unintended yet welcome consequence.

To achieve this, the program will prioritize **integrated communication strategies**. We aim to effectively engage adolescents and their communities by combining digital tools such as virtual influencers, targeted social media campaigns, and grassroots outreach. The blend of digital and traditional methods ensures inclusivity, bridging the gap for populations with limited access to technology while maximizing the reach of online content.

Additionally, the program seeks to **capitalize on the spillover effects** of digital campaigns. While focusing on specific at risk groups, the widespread visibility of these campaigns will naturally extend their influence to adolescents across Nepal. This spillover amplifies the program's reach and fosters a greater cultural shift in how adolescents perceive and interact with key topics like reproductive health, digital literacy, and personal empowerment.

Finally, the way forward emphasizes **sustainability and scalability**. The program ensures its impact extends beyond its current objectives by building reusable digital assets, such as virtual influencers, and integrating digital literacy into community outreach. Empowering stakeholders and communities to adopt and sustain digital strategies will create a foundation for ongoing development, paving the way for future innovations in adolescent engagement and empowerment.

This approach, rooted in inclusivity, adaptability, and collaboration, will create a resilient platform to amplify the voices of Nepal's youth and effectively address their needs, now and in the future.