UNICEF, Uganda Innovations for Child Health

SCRIPT:
One of Uganda’s newest citizens. . . . Baby Brian, days old, but already graduated out of the most fragile moments in a child’s life, thanks to being born here.

Using a mix of the age-old African bush telegraph and innovative ways of using modern technology, Uganda has cut the number of child deaths by two-thirds in less than a generation.

Through a rapid SMS system known as M-trac, the health staff gather facts from the patients in need, test and treat them, and manage the medicine supply chain in real time.

UPSOUND: Sister Pauline Nalutaaya, Nursing Officer
“It’s sending.”

The system tracks diseases and drug stocks, makes sick children better, and delights the medical staff here:

SOUNDBITE: Wassua Timothy Bukenia, Senior Clinical Officer, Butenga Health Centre (English)
“We are quite happy, overwhelmed by this. We are seeing now our communities believing in our services. Actually now we are demanding for more space. What initially we couldn’t think of we are now demanding, more space, more equipment, more drugs. We are no longer experiencing wastage of drugs.”

Villagers themselves, through a program of community dialogue, have helped feed the demand for better health services.

And the M-trac system has cut time and costs.

SOUNDBITE: Davis Musinguzi, Health Systems Specialist UNICEF Uganda (English)
“Previously if a facility had a drug stock out, they would have to wait three-four months for the next drug supply. Right now the district can look at his MTrac dashboard and identify which facilities have sufficient and which ones have a stock out and will be able to do a redistribution in his own district.”

Volunteers from Village Health Teams, like this woman, are on the frontline against the big killers of children here like malaria, pneumonia, and diarrhea. They diagnose, advise, refer, and sometimes treat diseases.

SOUNDBITE: Aisha Nanyinjo, thirty years old (Luganda)
“Esther taught me about proper feeding, to go to antenatal care and to sleep under a mosquito net.”

They use M-trac as a digital bridge between a pregnant mother, and a faraway clinic, making sure she gets lifesaving information and medication on time.

It’s all starting to give Uganda a reputation of being something of a laboratory of change for children. This prototype is being developed to beam vibrant health messages out to remote rural areas, like Karamoja in the far west. The results so far have been popular:

UPSOUND: Hartmut Androsch, Technical Coordinator, Technology for Development (T4D) UNICEF Uganda (English):
“I mean they were totally amazed. It was the first time they had seen something like that. First of all, many have not seen something like a healthcare video and then we even had it in their own local language, Karamoja language.”

Some of the tools made here are tested out by children on the ground at this center supported by UNICEF.

This digital drum which streams lifesaving information in a fun, child-friendly way is helping close the digital divide.

Technology can be a game changer for development here, but the balance with basics is seen as key.

SOUNDBITE: Leslie Reed, Mission Director, USAID Uganda (English)
“It’s a lot of the basic nuts and bolts frankly. It’s sanitation, water, electricity, it’s staff, it’s access. So I think it is going to be a shared commitment and we really need the government of Uganda to really step up. They have an excellent plan and we need to be working together to implement that plan.”

With rapid urbanization and the third highest fertility rates in the world, this East African country that crosses two hemispheres, faces a future where children will count for more.

This is Sarah Crowe in Bukomansimbi, Uganda reporting for UNICEF Television. For more information go to UNICEF.org/UniteforChildren.