



Bringing partners together to pilot a community health worker application in Sierra Leone

Background

In Sierra Leone, many digital health tools have been developed, piloted, and implemented without being scaled up by the country's Ministry of Health (MOH). There has not been enough coordination between the MOH and the organizations piloting these tools—and the end result is a health information system that is uncoordinated and fragmented. This makes it difficult for the MOH to solve its population's most pressing health problems, including malaria control activities.

To address this, USAID's Country Health Information Systems and Data Use (CHISU) program proposed piloting a game-changing tool in Sierra Leone: the Community Health Information System (CHIS). CHISU is supporting development of the CHIS into an application that community health workers (CHWs) can use when they are providing care in their communities.

This pilot is important because the MOH will take part in the development of a tool from the onset; actively participate in its piloting stages; build staff capacity at MOH's Directorate of Policy, Planning and Information (DPPI), which is responsible for the country's health data management; allow them to follow the current digital health roadmap; and allow them to absorb the tool into the MOH health management information system (HMIS) system.

Country Health Information Systems and Data Use (CHISU) is USAID's flagship data and information system program to strengthen host country capacity and leadership to manage and use health information systems to improve evidence-based decision-making. www.chisuprogram.org

Steps Taken

Medtronic LABS (a U.S.-based organization) and Community Health Access and Finance (CHAF, which is a local organization) are carrying out the pilot of the CHIS applications with CHISU's support and in collaboration with Sierra Leone's MOH. Medtronic LABS is piloting in Bombali district while CHAF is piloting in multiple districts, including Moyamba, Pujehun, Tonkolili, and Bombali. The tool will incorporate all CHW health service activities (including referral of pregnant women, administration of antimalarial medications, basic health information sharing among others) and will be piloted during 2024. This pilot is important because it will help the MOH understand the tool and also foster collaborative development of digital tools that benefit the MOH and people of Sierra Leone.



Participants at a workshop to develop CHIS work flows. Photo credit: CHISU

CHISU is coordinating the pilot by bringing together the implementing partners, DPPI, and the CHW Hub, which is responsible for coordinating CHWs in the country. It was important for DPPI and the CHW Hub to be very involved with the pilot to make sure that the CHIS would meet the needs of both the MOH and the wider Sierra Leone population.

So far, CHISU has supported the development of a technical working group across the CHIS landscape in Sierra Leone; helped the MOH develop self- and joint-assessment forms to understand the functionality and initial security issues; provided a technical expert to support the MOH information and communication technology team in developing the CHIS application; and hosted meetings and workshops to help the partners involved learn, understand, and evaluate the CHIS tool piloting process so that they can make a final decision on how the tool will be deployed nationwide.

“Developing an effective digital tool for community health workers requires all hands on deck to have a meaningful tool that will stand the test of time,” said Idrissa Cole, program country lead at Medtronic LABS. “This coordination has helped us to align our resources, expertise, and priorities, fostering innovation, scalability, and sustainability—and ultimately improving health care delivery and outcomes at the grassroots level.”

Expected Results + Next Steps

Coordination among private partners and Sierra Leone’s MOH has always been a challenge, especially when funding, work plans, and goals are not aligned. But CHISU has been able to play a crucial coordination role for the CHIS application piloting.

As a result of CHISU’s coordination efforts, Sierra Leone’s MOH will better understand what the CHIS tool is, what services it will offer, and how to develop skills in piloting digital health tools in the future—as well as ensure that they can coordinate future digital health tools that they need to pilot.

This coordination will also help the piloting institutions (Medtronic LABS and CHAF) understand the digital tool piloting landscape in Sierra Leone, improve their coordination, reduce the financial burden for the MOH, and help institutionalize the digital tools even before the final pilot data will be out. And ultimately, this improved coordination within the digital health platform landscape will bring about more sustainable digital tools for health service delivery.

“The CHISU coordination in the Community Health Information Systems is vital for community health workers in Sierra Leone,” said Sister Elizabeth Musa, CHW Hub National Coordinator, Directorate of Primary Health Care. “It has helped us develop the skills, ensured a seamless understanding of digital tools development, enhanced our resource allocation, and enabled timely interactions with the MOH data hub at DPPI. This coordination will optimize health care delivery, empower community health workers, and ultimately will improve health outcomes in underserved communities.”



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