eMpower project IBM and India HIV/AIDS Alliance

The Global Fund / Vincent Becker

The challenge

With over 2 million people living with HIV, India is home to the third-largest HIV epidemic worldwide.

The Vihaan Care and Support Program for People Living with HIV, a community-led initiative supplementing the national HIV treatment program, was confronted with large piles of paperwork generated from monitoring the millions of people participating in prevention programs or on treatment for HIV. India's health work force was drowning in paperwork, and that was having real health consequences for patients. There were problems tracking and supporting patients, with many missing or lost to follow up. And there were challenges in understanding the impact of programs on a timely basis. There was a real need to develop a paperless tool to report patient data that is both simple enough for all users and comprehensive that would allow staff to concentrate on supporting patients and improve the impact of a national health program.

The partnership

In 2017, IBM, the Global Fund and the India HIV/AIDS Alliance partnered to pilot a tablet-based mobile app in select districts in India to improve the quality of care for people living with HIV and TB. They each contributed their strength and expertise, and all partners benefited. It was the perfect test case for a technology solution that could transform care.

eMpower is a digital health solution that improves the efficiency of frontline community health workers through the use of a mobile app. It helps monitor services provided, speeds up reporting, and helps link clients with health care facilities and social protection schemes. It also facilitates a timely response to any shortages of medicines. The data is automatically synchronized with the Vihaan program's national database.

Now India, the Global Fund and IBM have a tool that can be expanded and adapted to serve more communities more effectively.

The impact

The pilot was an instant success and was quickly scaled up to cover the whole of India. The user-friendly software allows health workers to track people living with HIV, makes sure they are adhering to treatment, uploads data, and ensures confidentiality. An estimated 1.2 million people were tracked with the app between January 2018 and March 2019, and more than 2 million patients across India have benefited from eMpower to date.

The app also uses images to help patients with limited literacy and includes multiple language settings to accommodate local dialects, which help improve overall patient reporting and data quality. The technology has been rolled out nationally and has helped track down over 400,000 cases that were lost to follow up, improving access and adherence to HIV treatment.

One of the vulnerable groups to benefit from the eMpower program is the Hijra community, India's transgender and intersex people, known as the country's "third sex." India estimates a 3.14% HIV prevalence rate among transgender people. Altaf Sheikh (left), a community health activist, uses the eMpower app during a visit with a patient in Mumbai.

Q&A with **Sonal Mehta,** CEO, India HIV/AIDS Alliance

1 What are some of the challenges the eMpower app has helped overcome?

The unique feature of the eMpower application is that it is a client management system. It therefore helped community outreach workers to prioritize their clients based on their needs and vulnerability. The app allows the health workers to provide a range of services, including HIV testing and access to antiretroviral therapy, health monitoring to ensure adherence to treatment, TB screening with links to treatment, and access to welfare schemes.

2 What has the eMpower project achieved to date?

The eMpower application has increased the efficiency of outreach workers in providing services to people living with HIV in a timely manner. The follow-up rate increased from 42% before the use of the tablet to 52% with the tablet. Similarly, HIV testing of partners and family members, and health monitoring increased. TB screening drastically improved by five times over the baseline.

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3 What are some of the lessons learned?

We have seen that the user-friendly technology increases the efficiency of community workers – it allows them to focus on the patients rather than the bureaucracy. They are able to assess a patient's needs more quickly with the app and provide the necessary services more effectively. We have seen that if technology is used to support frontline workers, it yields impressive results.

4 Is the project going to be scaled up in the future?

The eMpower project has the potential to be expanded in different health areas (HIV prevention, TB and sexual health) and beyond India. The India HIV/AIDS Alliance is working closely with the government's central TB division to explore upgrading the eMpower tool to serve TB patients as well.

STEP UP THE FIGHT

Ending the epidemics of HIV, TB and malaria by 2030 is within reach, but not yet firmly in our grasp. After years of remarkable progress, new threats such as stalled funding and growing drug resistance have pushed us off track. We now face a decisive moment. Do we step up the fight, or do we allow ourselves to slip back? The Global Fund's fundraising target for the next three-year cycle is at least US$14 billion. The Global Fund is calling on the private sector to mobilize at least US$1 billion. These funds will help save 16 million lives and cut the mortality rate from HIV, TB and malaria in half by 2023, while building stronger systems for health that will enable the achievement of universal health coverage. It is time to step up the fight.

About the Global Fund

The Global Fund is a partnership designed to accelerate the end of AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria as epidemics. As an international organization, the Global Fund mobilizes and invests more than US$4 billion a year to support programs run by local experts in more than 100 countries. In partnership with governments, civil society, technical agencies, the private sector and people affected by the diseases, we are challenging barriers and embracing innovation.