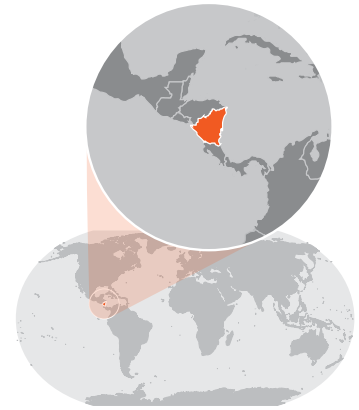


CHATSALUD NICARAGUA



BACKGROUND

HEALTH LANDSCAPE IN NICARAGUA

In Nicaragua, 1:4 adolescent girls will become pregnant before the age of 19, and in some rural areas, that statistic rises to 1:3 girls.

As studies have shown, the risk of maternal mortality doubles for adolescents under the age of 19. In addition, the infant mortality rate increases among those born to adolescent mothers, and they also face other health risks such as malnutrition.

While nearly one third of Nicaragua's population is comprised of youth, many adolescents face barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services. Several studies have cited distrust and negative attitudes toward health centers among youth, mainly due to a fear that the services are not confidential.

Instead, many adolescents use the internet to learn about sexual and reproductive health, and purchase family planning methods from pharmacies and local ventas (storefronts).

CHATSALUD AND MHEALTH IN NICARAGUA

Nearly 90% of Nicaraguans have access to mobile phones, and cell phone signals are available country-wide. Youth are especially accustomed to using mobile phones. When asked about their comfort level with texting, one youth responded that “texting is kind of like my hobby.”

ChatSalud is a project that aims to harness the ubiquity and anonymity that mobile phones provide by using SMS to connect youth to sexual and reproductive health



TWO COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS USE THE CHATSALUD SYSTEM FOR THE FIRST TIME.



A YOUTH GROUP MEMBER USES A MODEL PHONE DESIGNED BY A PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER TO SIMULATE USING THE CHATSALUD SYSTEM WHICH WAS USED TO TEST THE MESSAGING.

information. We're hoping youth will use their phones to find "friendly" services in nearby cities.

While many youth already use their mobile phones to search for sexual and reproductive health information, some have complained that the internet connection is slow and inconsistent, and that it is difficult to know which websites have reliable information.

Since ChatSalud is based on a mobile platform that does not rely on the internet, but rather on the signal from local cell phone towers, SMS can be a faster and more reliable way to access information.

LESSONS LEARNED AND CHALLENGES

PROGRAM SPECIFICS

PARTNERS

ChatSalud is not an organization in and of itself; rather, it is a project run by collaboration of local organizations that started as a Peace Corps project. A group of volunteers came together and realized that they could leverage the power and anonymity of mobile phones to connect youth to reliable sexual and reproductive health information.

The idea caught on, and several partners have come together to bring ChatSalud to life. Together, this collaboration of partners has the capacity to bring a project like ChatSalud to scale.

ChatSalud is housed within the Nicaraguan Red Cross, where Planned Parenthood Global has channeled funding to hire a full-time project coordinator. Planned Parenthood Global and the Nicaraguan Red Cross provide technical support in project implementation, management, and monitoring and evaluation.

Peace Corps Nicaragua is still an integral component of the project, providing brainpower and people power to help get the project off the ground. By being able to tap into the network of the approximately 200 volunteers living across Nicaragua, ChatSalud has been able to carry out research activities with youth to ensure that it meets their needs.

CIES-UNAN, the Nicaraguan School of Public Health, is providing expertise in public health to develop ChatSalud content and to help with the monitoring, evaluation, and research components of the project.

Other partners are contributing significant in-kind contributions to the project, including: a major telecommunications company in Nicaragua has agreed to provide free text-messaging for ChatSalud and the end-user, making it completely free to the general public, and a marketing firm is developing a campaign to increase awareness of ChatSalud across the greater population. Other organizations are dedicating their time and expertise to advise the ChatSalud team on themes as diverse as public health, ICT, and mobile health in the Nicaraguan context.

DEVELOPING CONTENT FOR CHATSALUD

In order to develop appropriate text messages, the ChatSalud team worked hand-in-hand with a committee of experts in sexual and reproductive health issues from Nicaragua. Using a combination of MAMA messaging, m4RH messaging, and messaging from local organizations as a base, we adopted all messages to fit the local context.



A YOUTH GROUP TESTS CHATSALUD AND SHOWS OFF THEIR CELL PHONES, FOUND UBIQUITOUSLY THROUGHOUT NICARAGUA.

Once the messages were finalized within the content development committee, we reached out to Peace Corps Volunteers across Nicaragua who were already working with youth groups. We trained the Peace Corps Volunteers to lead focus groups with the youth to determine how we could modify the content to be engaging, cool, and informative for youth. We used paper prototypes of mobile phones to ensure that the interface was user friendly and made sense to our end-users.

Finally, all text messages were reviewed and vetted by the Nicaraguan School of Public Health (CIES-UNAN) and all content will undergo an ethical review before being included in the ChatSalud system.

HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

At the heart of ChatSalud is the belief in human-centered design that puts people at the center of the design process. Rather than retro-fitting an innovation to a health issue, we first wanted to explore the challenges and assets of Nicaraguan communities and the needs of youth who want to access sexual and reproductive health information. ChatSalud has used a number of methods to ensure a participatory design process.

Through a relationship with Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and the Johns Hopkins Global mHealth Initiative, the ChatSalud team conducted 42 in-depth interviews among adolescents ages 14-25 in four separate communities located in four distinct regions of Nicaragua.

The purpose of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of the challenges that youth face in accessing sexual and reproductive health services at their local health centers, how youth learn about sexual and reproductive health, and lastly, how they would feel about accessing that type of information through text messaging. Each participant got to test out a prototype of ChatSalud before giving their feedback to the interviewer.

The result of the formative research was an understanding of the socio-cultural barriers that youth are up against when accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services, as well as of where a mobile health intervention might be able to make the greatest impact within the existing health system.

The ChatSalud team ran a small pilot among 25 youth in a rural community in Nicaragua that ran for three-weeks. The pilot included a workshop at the beginning to learn how to use ChatSalud, short text-based surveys sent out via SMS once a week, and focus groups to allow for more in-depth feedback. This helped the ChatSalud team figure out what worked well, and what still needs improvement, before launching. The team hopes to run another small pilot with a slightly larger group of participants in the next couple months.

CHALLENGES

As with any project, there have been a number of challenges and bottlenecks along the way. The major challenges with the ChatSalud project can fit under three main categories: Sustainability, funding, and politics.

- **SUSTAINABILITY:** The problem of sustainability was clear from the beginning. Since the project was started by Peace Corps Volunteers who serve in Nicaragua for two-three year terms, the Co-Founders of the project had two years to turn the project over to a Nicaraguan organization. The project was successfully transferred

over to the Nicaraguan Red Cross in March 2014 with financial support from Planned Parenthood Global.

- **FUNDING:** ChatSalud must be free to the end-user in order to reach those who need the service most. As such, it was imperative that we engage with the telecommunication companies in Nicaragua to ensure free text-messaging for us and for the end-user. In the end, persistence and networking have helped solidify a relationship with one of the telecommunication companies, but we are still working to engage with the second major company in Nicaragua to ensure access for all Nicaraguans, regardless of their mobile carrier.
- **POLITICS:** In order for the project to exist, the ChatSalud team had to develop an intimate understanding of the political climate in Nicaragua and learn how to navigate changing political currents, motives, and personnel. Knowing who to contact to achieve certain goals has been a crucial element to the project, and the ChatSalud team is still learning and adapting to the ever-changing politics in Nicaragua. While politics are different for every context, it is important that every organization understand the setting in which they are working, because it could mean the success or failure of a project.

FUTURE PLANS

After a lot of groundwork the ChatSalud team is finally preparing to rollout the first phase of ChatSalud in a major Nicaraguan city. Using lessons learned from our formative research, we will launch ChatSalud using a community-based approach, engaging with local leaders, youth, and health care providers.

In addition to an opt-in text message system and a population-based marketing campaign, ChatSalud will also train youth promoters to teach their peers about ChatSalud. We would also like to work directly with health care providers to raise awareness of and conduct training for youth-friendly practices in order to encourage the utilization of available health care services among youth.

Looking to the future we hope to learn from our first rollout of ChatSalud and continue to scale up in a systematic way. All the decisions we have made as a team have been made with scale up in mind. As a result, the technology on which ChatSalud is based is scalable, and most importantly, the partnerships we have made can support a country-wide growth of ChatSalud.



Mobile Alliance for Maternal Action

The MAMA Community Spotlight series shines a light on some of the great work being done by organizations using MAMA's adaptable mobile messages. Each month we feature a new organization that has downloaded our messages and is using mobile technology to improve maternal, newborn and child health.

Inspired by these innovative programs? Download the MAMA messages for yourself by visiting www.mobilemamaalliance.org and completing our short questionnaire.

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