

An Inventory of e-health Programs for Adolescents in Bangladesh

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Key Words

Adolescents, e-health program, sexual and reproductive health

CONTENTS

ACRONYMS	4
1. INTRODUCTION	5
2. OBJECTIVE	5
4. FINDINGS	6
4.1 Types of services/information provided	6
4.2 Modality of providing information/services	7
4.3 Strengths of e-health initiative	7
4.4 Barriers of e-health initiative	8
5. LIMITATIONS OF THE INVENTORY	8
APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY TABLE OF E-HEALTH INITIATIVES, 2017	9
APPENDIX 2: KEY INFORMATION ABOUT E-HEALTH INITIATIVES, 2017	10

ACRONYMS

ASRHR	Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights
RDM	Research for Decision Makers
TRAction	Translating Research into Action
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescents, aged 10-19, constitute about one fifth of the total population of Bangladesh. In recent years the government of Bangladesh (GoB) has been paying close attention in addressing the special health needs of this group. This is evidenced by the development of the National Strategy for Adolescent Health 2017-2030 and the formulation of national plan of action for the strategy. In addition to GoB, several other stakeholders including developmental partners and national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been working in the field of adolescent health. Majority of these programs involve provision of health information and services to adolescents, with NGOs and development partners taking increasingly innovative approaches and becoming more inclusive in their coverage of target groups.

Electronic health (e-health) is an umbrella that consists of a spectrum of technologies including computers, telephone and wireless communications that enables a customer to communicate easily with health service providers and provides a unique platform for care management and health¹ education. In recent years more attention has been given to improve access to health information through e-health. This is particularly true for improving access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information to adolescents where privacy and confidentiality are two major issues.

While this approach is relatively new in Bangladesh, there are a handful of programs which provide confidential SRH information and services to adolescents through a variety of platforms such as mobile phone hotlines, mobile apps and websites. These programs create awareness amongst adolescents about different physical, psychological and social changes they go through by answering their queries and also by providing confidential counseling and referral services. Considering the current interest in providing SHR services to adolescents using innovative approaches, the USAID's Research for Decision Makers (RDM) Activity, implemented by icddr,b, undertook an activity to make an inventory of the existing e-health initiatives that have targeted adolescents, and document their experiences in providing services to the young people using e-health approach.

2. OBJECTIVE

The aim of this activity was to prepare an inventory of e-health initiatives for adolescents in Bangladesh; document the spectrum of services provided by these programs, and understand the experiences of running these programs.

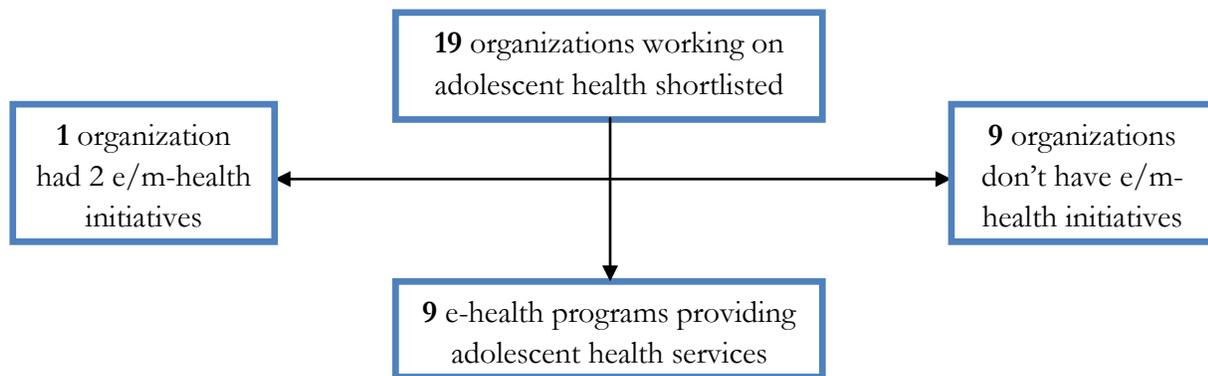
3. METHODS

The activity was started using an already existing inventory of organizations prepared by an icddr,b study funded through USAID's Translating Research into Action (TRAction) Project which listed 20

¹ Bangladesh Bureau Of. "Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh." Statistics Division, Ministry of Planning, Dhaka, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (2011).

programs providing SRH services to adolescents. The current e-health inventory under USAID's RDM Activity began by reaching out to these 20 organizations and checking with them whether they provide e-health services to adolescents. They were also asked to provide information about any other e-health initiatives for adolescents, if they were aware of. Using this snow-ball method of sampling, a total 19 programs were identified. The key persons of all these programs were communicated by phone and/or email to be considered for the inventory. After verification, out of these 19 programs, only nine were reported to provide e-health services to adolescents and thus, included in the inventory. Managers of these programs were interviewed to know more about their programs, after which a data matrix was developed to summarize service provision and strengths and barriers of e-health initiatives for adolescents in Bangladesh. This activity was conducted during July-September, 2017.

Figure-1. Identifying organizations running e-health initiatives for adolescents



4. FINDINGS

The activity sought specific details regarding the e-health initiatives. Detailed responses were elicited regarding the type of service/information provided, modality of providing the services, target groups served, and geographical coverage. Appendix 1 provides summary information about all e-health initiatives and Appendix 2 provides information on each of the nine e-health initiatives reviewed.

4.1 Types of services/information provided

Most of the identified organizations reported providing SRH information, followed by mental health services. It should be noted that some organizations provided information beyond health (for example legal aid), allowing for a more broad approach towards adolescent health. Under sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), there were slight variations in the type of information and topics of interest covered. These variations are detailed below:

Ritu project by Red Orange Media and Communication Ltd. reported focusing on menstrual hygiene management (MHM) by a website. Another website, **SHARE-Net**, maintained by the same

organization, was dedicated towards sharing experiences and lessons learned among actors working in adolescent sexual and reproductive health rights (ASRHR).

BALIKA project by Population Council was a noteworthy initiative as it used an interactive digital platform aimed at teaching both in-and-out of school female adolescents' educational content around Maths and English. This initiative, while ended in 2016, is included because of the possibility of this particular aspect of the project potentially being replicated at a larger scale.

The **Meena App by UNICEF** is another interesting e-health initiative. Building on an established reputation (Mina cartoons since late 1990s), the popular Mina character is the basis for an adventure game that combines entertainment with disseminating health and child rights information as the main character 'Mina' progresses different levels in the game.

Generation Breakthrough (GB) project, supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands is a flagship program for adolescents and youth. The project's aim is to empower adolescents by supporting economic development through a number of interventions. The first is their '**Dosh Unisher Mor**' helpline on SRH, and the other being their school-based SRH education modules which have been turned into games².

4.2 Modality of providing information/services

Most organizations reported using websites and hotlines or mobile apps to allow accessibility of the adolescents to their services. One organization (**DNet**) reported using a mobile app to provide an interactive information database for adolescents interested in SRH information. In particular, two mental health services (**Moner Bondu** and **Dosh Unisher Mor**) utilized telephone/hotlines as a mode of reaching adolescents.

4.3 Strengths of e-health initiative

The anonymity feature of most of these initiatives was reported as a major strength, particularly for "taboo" subjects around SRH. E-health initiatives were reported in creating an enabling environment for adolescents to safely seek information from credible sources, without disclosing their identity. The growth of the information and communication technology (ICT) sector in general was reported to be a positive influence in increasing access and coverage by the e-health initiatives. In particular, BALIKA's education intervention noted that the interactive nature of the teaching sessions on spoken English and Math were greatly appreciated by students. Adolescents, in general, were reported to have an interest in utilizing ICT, and this interest was perceived as a benefit.

² We have not included the latter as a separate e-health components, as the games were said to be launching soon as downloadable content on Directorate General of Family Planning (DGFP) website and also as a mobile app. However, this app was not given any particular official name during the data collection period of the e-health inventory.

4.4 Barriers of e-health initiative

The following were some of the major reported challenges faced by the organizations operating e-health initiatives:

- i. Adolescents have limited access to a smart phone device or the internet, which is needed to connect to e-health services;
- ii. Gender divide of accessibility, with more boys than girls having access to mobile phones and/or computers;
- iii. Most of the e-health initiatives are donor dependent, and reported to have limited fiscal resources to expand the e-health initiatives;
- iv. For hotlines, the operating hours are not ideal as adolescents are usually in school when the hotlines are active.

5. LIMITATIONS OF THE INVENTORY

This activity faced some logistic difficulties along the way, which are summarized below:

- i. Getting timely response or setting meetings with potential resource persons for interview due to their busy time schedule;
- ii. Resource persons were not always familiar with other actors operating e-health initiatives; and could not provide additional information on other e-health initiatives
- iii. Some confusion was seen among few interviewees as to what e-health interventions entailed: some respondents thought that using tablets for data collection and analysis were examples of e-health interventions.
- iv. Not all organizations maintained data metrics around services utilized, number of adolescents covered by intervention, or number of adolescents accessing the interventions, particularly in the case of the hotlines.

APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY TABLE OF E-HEALTH INITIATIVES, 2017

Name of Initiative and website/links:	Year	Type of Services and Platform Used	Beneficiary and # of Beneficiary Reached	Strengths	Challenges	Donors
Maya Apa https://www.maya.com.bd Organization: MAYALOGY LTD	2014-Present	Connect adolescents to sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), legal aid and mental health experts –through mobile app, free basics, SMS and website.	16-19 and older; Beneficiary reached: 300,000	Independent platform; anonymity & privacy maintained; free expert counseling available 24/7.	Limited to internet users and users are mostly male adolescents	BRAC, Robi and ICT Division of Bangladesh.
Aponjon Koishor http://www.aponjon.com.bd/ Organization: DNET	2015-Present	Age specific SRH information using question/answer mode; links to other relevant resources - through mobile app	10-19 years, and their parents/guardians; Beneficiary reached: 20,000 downloads	The app is in Bangla and free; age-specific contents for young and older adolescents; available to parents/guardians; privacy maintained.	Lack of funds to update the app.	USAID
Dosh Unisher Mor (Generation Breakthrough Project, GBK) http://bangladesh.unfpa.org/en/new/s/generation-breakthrough Organization: Plan Bangladesh & UNFPA	2012-Present	SRH counseling and service referrals and violence prevention services. The helpline is available 7 days a week, 9:00am-9:00pm, except government holidays – through helpline	10-19 years; Beneficiary reached: 19,000	A pool of experts in adolescent SRHR are attached to this program	Use of helpline is not free; high turnover rate of trained counselors	Kingdom of Netherlands , Global Affairs Canada, and European Commission
SHARE-Net www.share-netbangladesh.org/ Organization: RED ORGANGE LTD. & JPG School of Public Health	2014-Present	Online knowledge management platform for stakeholders engaged in SRHR to share their work and lessons learnt around adolescent SRHR – through website	Stakeholders working on adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights (ASRHR) in Bangladesh; Beneficiary reached: Over 500 organizations signed up as members	Common platform for ASRHR; organize periodic workshops	On-boarding of all organizations in the platform	Royal Tropical Institute in The Netherlands
Ritu Project http://rituonline.org/ Organization: RED ORGANGE LTD. (MEDIA & COMMUNICATIONS)	2016-Present	Online website that provides information around menstrual hygiene management (MHM) –	12-15 year old girls; Beneficiary reached: no information	Breaking taboos around menstruation; creating awareness about MHM involving family members and defining their roles	Lack of access to high speed internet; getting people used to the idea of using e-platforms as a source of information	Government of the Kingdom of Netherlands
MONER BONDHU http://monerbondhu.org/ Organization: MONER Bondhu	2015-present	Counseling and awareness for mental health using a hotline	13-19 years and above Beneficiary reached: 10,000 adolescents	Anonymous counseling approach; confidentiality maintained	Lack of funds	Self finance
BALIKA https://www.popcouncil.org/research/balika-bangladeshi-association-for-life-skills-income-and-knowledge-for-ado Organization: Population Council	2012-2016	Interactive mobile app and websites designed to include content around English and Maths for educational purposes.	12-18 year of adolescent girls; Beneficiary reached: 11,609	Program participants found the interactive aspect of the project interesting; easy accessibility of the service in the classroom	Limited content in the education material	Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands, Bangladesh
Meena Games App Organization: UNICEF	Dec 2016-present	Basic health information such as hand washing & nutrition, and child rights around preventing early child marriage – through mobile app	10-15 year olds (older age groups can also play); Beneficiary reached: 500,000 downloads	Built on the reputation of Meena being a cultural “icon” and easily recognizable symbol	Access to a smart phone with data package to download and play the app	UNICEF
Call Centre Organization: BRAC	Oct2016-Present	SRH issues along with psychosocial support through call centre	10-19 years Beneficiary reached: 90 calls /month (app.)	Use of BRAC’s existing network to connect to this program	Service not available 24 hours; rural adolescents have limited access to mobile phones.	BRAC

APPENDIX 2: KEY INFORMATION ABOUT E-HEALTH INITIATIVES, 2017

1. Maya Apa

Name of Organization	MAYALOGY LTD
Name of Initiative	Maya Apa
Duration of Initiative	2014-Present (began in 2011 as a blog)
Type of services and platform used	It links interested adolescents to experts in public health (SRHR), legal aid (via BRAC), and mental health using a mobile app, free basics, SMS and website. It also provides adolescents with health, nutrition, and child rights/protection legal information.
Major beneficiary	Age 16-19 and older
No. of adolescents reached	Approximately 300,000 users
Target location	All over Bangladesh
Strengths of initiative	(1) Anonymity & privacy maintained (2) Independent platform (3) Free expert counseling available 24/7
Major challenges	(1) Adolescent don't always have access to devices or internet (2) Gender divide in accessibility (more males than females have access to mobiles and technology)
Future Growth/targets:	(1) Develop kiosks at schools for increased outreach in school and colleges, and (2) Increase access to technology
Donors	BRAC, Robi and ICT Division Bangladesh.
Website/links:	https://www.maya.com.bd/

2. Aponjon Koishor

Name of Organization	DNET
Name of Initiative	<i>Aponjon Koishor</i>
Duration of Initiative	2015-Present
Type of services and platform used	Mobile app that provides information about health (i.e. SRH, mental health) along with information about puberty. Age-specific contents for adolescents; information is also available for guardians or adolescents
Major beneficiary	10-19 years, as well as parents/guardians
No. of adolescents reached	Approximately 20,000 downloads
Target location	All over Bangladesh
Strengths of initiative	(1) The app has a question answer data bank which is accessible by anyone, having a smart phone and can understand Bangla (2) Creates an enabling environment as guardians/parents also have access to the program (3) Providing credible/scientifically sound evidence based information (4) Age specific contents; contents for parents/guardians
Major challenges	(1) Information is limited to digital platform and Bangla users (2) Donor dependent
Future Growth	(1) Expanding beyond Bangladesh (2) Allow sign-in capabilities with Facebook or email account while maintaining anonymity
Donors	USAID
Website/links:	http://www.aponjon.com.bd/

3. Dosh Unisher Mor

Name of Organization	PLAN BANGLADESH & UNFPA
Name of Initiative	Dosh Unisher Mor (Generation Breakthrough Project, GBK)
Duration of Initiative	2012-Present
Type of services and platform used	The helpline provides SRH counselling and service referrals, and violence prevention services. The Department of Counselling and Educational Psychology of the University of Dhaka helps maintaining quality of the counselling services. The helpline is available 7 days a week, 9:00am-9:00pm excluding government holidays.
Major beneficiary	10-19 years
No. of adolescents reached in target area	19,000
Target location	Barisal (Barguna & Patuakhali) and Dhaka
Strengths of initiative	(1) A pool of global SRHR experts are involved in the project. (2) Plan Bangladesh has a long history of working on ASRHR
Major challenges	(1) Calling the helpline is not free (2) Most callers are boys. (3) The timing from 9am-9pm isn't ideal for adolescents as majority of them are in schools for most of the time (4) High turnover rate of trained counselors for the program
Future Growth	(1) Continuation of the hotlines through support of the Netherlands Government beyond the project completion date (2) Possibility of call rates being subsidized (3) Using FB to reach adolescents in the program area
Donors	Kingdom of Netherlands , Global Affairs Canada, and European Commission
Website/links:	http://bangladesh.unfpa.org/en/news/generation-breakthrough

4. SHARE-Net

Name of Organization	RED ORGANGE LTD. (MEDIA & COMMUNICATIONS)
Name of Initiative	SHARE-Net
Duration of Initiative	2014-Present
Type of services and platform used	Online knowledge management platform for stakeholders engaged in SRHR to share their work and lessons learnt around ASRHR
Major beneficiary	Stakeholders and actors working on ASRHR in Bangladesh
No. of adolescents reached in target area	Over 500 organizations signed up as members
Target location	All over Bangladesh
Strengths of initiative	(1) Leading knowledge platform in regards to SRHR (2) Includes multiples experts in the field of SRHR (3) Use workshops to increase knowledge around BCC
Major challenges	On-boarding of all organizations working on SRHR in the platform
Future Growth	Expanding the initiatives to reach adolescents with special need such as an app for adolescents with disabilities
Donors	Royal Tropical Institute in The Netherlands
Website/links:	www.share-netbangladesh.org/

5. RITU Project

Name of Organization	RED ORGANGE LTD. (MEDIA & COMMUNICATIONS)
Name of Initiative	Ritu Project
Duration of Initiative	2014-Present
Type of services and platform used	Online website that provides information around menstrual hygiene management (MHM) to adolescents as well as parents/guardians & teachers
Major beneficiary	12-15 year old girls
No. of adolescents reached in target area	No record
Target location	8 upazilla in Netrokona District
Strengths of initiative	(1) Breaking the taboo around menstruation (2) Creating more awareness around MHM (3) Involving family members and defining their roles in MHM
Major challenges	(1) Lack of access of young girls to high speed internet (2) Getting people used to the idea of using e-platforms as a source of information for MHM
Future Growth	Partnering with local NGOs and schools to increase coverage
Donors	Government of the Kingdom of Netherlands
Website/links:	http://rituonline.org/

6. Moner Bondhu

Name of Organization	MONER BONDHU
Name of Initiative	Moner Bondhu
Duration of Initiative	2015-present
Type of services and platform used	Counseling and awareness for mental health using a hotline
Major beneficiary	13-19 years and above
No. of adolescents reached in target area	10,000 adolescents
Target location	Dhaka city and other major districts
Strengths of initiative	(1) Using an anonymous counseling approach
Major challenges	(1) Lack of funding (2) Prejudice around mental health
Future Growth	-
Donors	Self finance
Website/links:	http://monerbondhu.org/

7. BALIKA Project

Name of Organization	BALIKA PROJECT, POPULATION COUNCIL
Name of Initiative	BALIKA Project's education arm
Duration of Initiative	2012-2016
Type of service and platform used	Interactive mobile app and websites designed to include content around English and Maths for educational purposes.
Major beneficiary	12-18 year (in and out of school girls)
No. of adolescents reached in target area	Approximately 11,609 adolescent girls
Target location	Shatkhira, Khulna
Strengths of initiative	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Girls found the interactive aspect of the educational arm of BALIKA project interesting (2) Girls could practice the educational sessions by themselves if they wanted (3) Used classroom at primary school for easier accessibility
Major barriers/challenges	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) This initiative was part of a research project (2) Content of the education material was limited
Future Growth	Population Council is hoping to utilize the materials in 2 separate projects, one with UNFPA under their Accelerating Action to End Child Marriage project which will be implemented by MoWCA, and with UNICEF.
Donors	Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands, Bangladesh
Website/links:	http://www.popcouncil.org/research/balika-bangladeshi-association-for-life-skills-income-and-knowledge-for-ado

8. Meena App

Name of Organization	UNICEF
Name of Initiative	Meena Games App
Duration of Initiative	December 2016 -present
Type of services and platform used	Basic health information such as hand washing and nutrition, and child rights information around preventing early child marriage through mobile app
Major beneficiary	10-15 year olds, although older age groups can play as well
No. of adolescents reached in target area	Approximately 500,000 downloads
Target location	All over Bangladesh
Strengths of initiative	(1) Builds on the reputation of Mina being a cultural “icon” and easily recognizable symbol
Major challenges	(1) Adolescents need access to a smart phone with data package in order to download and play the app
Future Growth	Making the game available offline so that it doesn’t require access to the internet, thus making it more freely available
Donors	UNICEF
Website/links:	https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.unicef.meenagam&hl=in

9. BRAC

Name of Organization	BRAC
Name of Initiative	SRH Call Centre
Duration of Initiative	October 2016-Present
Type of service and platform used	SRH related issues along with psychosocial support through a call centre
Major beneficiary	10-19 years
No. of adolescents reached in target area	Average 90 calls per month received
Target location	61 districts (excluding hill tracts)
Strengths of initiative	(1) BRAC’s network is extended upto the grassroots level, so by calling the call-centre adolescents can have access to information not normally available through other sources.
Major challenges	(1) Service not available 24 hours a day (2) Rural adolescents have limited access to mobile phones.
Future Growth	Bring 24 hour service time
Donors	BRAC
Website/links:	N/A