

## **PROMISING PRACTICE: UNICEF Zambia U Report SMS pilot**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Key Promising Practices:**

- Innovative SMS platform to accelerate HIV prevention among adolescents and youth
- Use of interactive SMS not just for information exchange but polls, campaigns and gathering of opinion and feedback on HIV and VMMC services
- Successful integration of existing youth ambassadors from climate projects to the U-Report frontline.

#### **Introduction:**

UNICEF, mandated by the UN General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children’s rights, runs a portfolio of projects in Zambia aimed at eliminating new HIV infections among children and young people. In recent years UNICEF Zambia has worked with the National HIV/AIDS/STI/TB Council to bring “Brothers for Life” to Zambia, as well as spearheading “Programme Mwana”, which uses mobile phones to improve early infant HIV diagnostic services (EID), patient tracing, and post-natal follow-up and care.

Inspired by a similar intervention run by UNICEF Uganda, UNICEF Zambia has recently set up a mobile phone short-text (SMS) platform called “Zambia U-Report”, to accelerate HIV prevention among adolescents and young adults in the move towards a HIV free generation in Zambia.

This pilot project is responding to the high prevalence rate of HIV among young people in Zambia, whereby 40% of new HIV infections occur among Adolescents and Youth (A&Y) aged 15-24 years. UNICEF sites recent research estimating prevalence rates as reaching 3 HIV infections per hour; 72 per day; and 27,000 per year among this group.

Data collected by the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Agency – ZICTA suggests mobile phone usage has grown by some nearly 8 million people over the last 10 years, with a 63% penetration rate amongst the general population in 2011, compared to very few users at all in 2000. Usage is expected to continue increasing – between 2010 and 2011 penetration leapt from 40% to 63% in that year alone. Internet usage appears to be on the decrease with SMS taking over.

U-Report therefore harnesses this trend and uses interactive text messaging to increased knowledge of and demand for HIV prevention services, including advice and information on how to access VMMC. The wider intention is to use the SMS tool to monitor utilisation, availability and quality of adolescent and youth friendly VMMC services.

The project is being piloted in Lusaka and Copperbelt districts January-December 2013 (check), and launched in these respective regions on World Youth Day and World AIDS day, with a number of high profile guests and engaging events.

UNICEF is aiming to scale up the project to national targets starting in 2014, subject to funding. (CHECK).



## Target Groups

- Adolescents and Youth (A&Y) aged 15-24 years. There are a total of 2.8 million youths aged 15-24 in Zambia, according to 2012 estimates, about 50% of whom are male. Of these, U-Report is targeting youths in the Lusaka and Copperbelt districts during the phase 1 pilot.
- Secondary audiences include males and their partners aged between 24-35 who may also find the text service beneficial (as someone up to age 35 is defined as “young” by the National Aids Council).
- Indirect beneficiaries will include non-U-reporters who have also been reached by related radio and TV activities.

## Scale and scope

Phase 1 of U-Report is the Pilot and Evaluation, which runs for a year until December 2013.

Pilot districts Lusaka and Chongwe have the following targets in regard to VMMC:

*-Lusaka VMMC targets (15-49) by 2015 = 206,305*

*-Chongwe VMMC targets (15-49) by 2015 = 26,035*

Phase 2 would include nationwide scale up (CHECK) between 2014-16 and overall evaluation in 2017.

UNICEF has a number of plans to develop the use of the SMS system further during 2013-15, which would include scale up to provide an SMS “Knowledge Bank” for HIV/AIDS & STI’s, an SMS based counselling curriculum on these topics and an SMS “intervention package” for high impact HIV services. (CHECK IF THESE ARE HAPPENING YET OR STILL PIPELINE)

## Organizations Involved

*i) Program Implementation Activities:*

**Lead:** UNICEF

**Partners:** CHAMP is a sub-grantee providing the SMS counseling component. National Coordination partners include: National AIDS Council, The MCDMCH/ District Medical Offices and Provincial Medical Offices and members of the VMMC Technical Working Group,.

*ii) Evaluation Activities:*

**Principal investigators:** IDinsight and UNICEF

- *Sub-grantee:* IDinsight
- *Co-investigators/Research associates:* NAC, MCDMCH, CHAMP, Jhpiego, CHAZ

**Funding:** UNICEF

**Who is carrying out demand generation activities?**

UNICEF ambassadors / U-reporters and CHAMP counsellors

## APPROACH TO DEMAND CREATION

### The approach to Demand Creation:

**Key message(s)**

- Clear, comprehensive advice about VMMC, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections
- Emphasis on interactivity and sharing information and opinion: U-Reporters encouraged to share their knowledge with friends and empower them, and to use the SMS service to give their own opinions on HIV related issues, and to participate in polls and campaigns.

## Type of Intervention

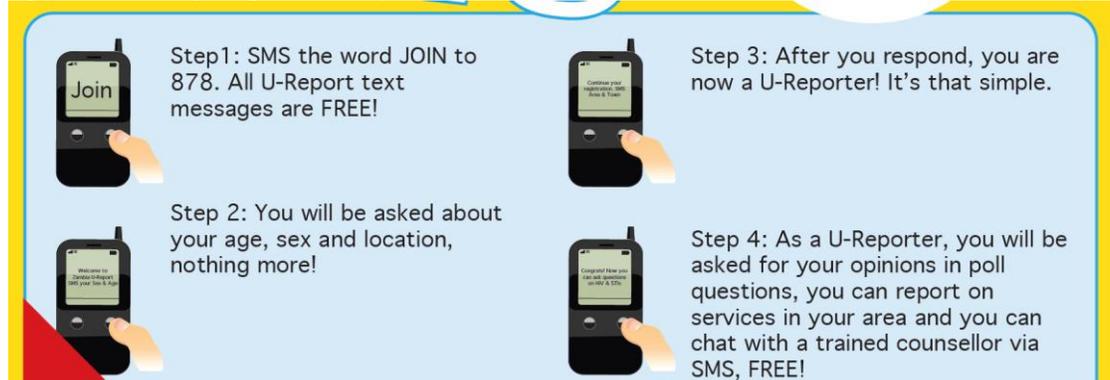
U-Report is a free to register interactive sexual health counselling service for adolescents and youth.

It proposes to:

- Promote adolescent and youth participation in National HIV response by getting their opinions on issues that affect their vulnerability and risk to HIV
- Increase HIV knowledge through an individualised two-way interactive SMS model
- Increase demand for HIV high impact prevention services, including VMMC
- Monitor availability, utilisation and quality of adolescents and youth sensitive HIV services.

Once registered as “U-Reporters” by texting “JOIN” to 878, users can text counsellors straight away, asking questions such as “Where can I go and get tested?” or “Where can I go for male circumcision?” Counsellors are advised to encourage U-Reporters to come back and report on how the services were for them. The opt-in registration service ensures that messages are only sent to people who have requested to receive U-Report SMS’s.

### *Opt-in/Voluntary Registration by SMS*



Users are only asked for their age, sex and location upon registration. Names are not required so the service remains completely anonymous. Counselling is given so that it is appropriate to the person’s age and gender, and referrals are to local services close to where the person lives.

The NGO CHAMP, who specializes in HIV prevention counseling, is partnering on the project, trained by UNICEF in using SMS language to provide health advice and create demand for VMMC services. CHAMP provides all the counselors for the project while UNICEF manages the overall platform, campaign messages, and data analyses. The service allows for two-way interactions with the counsellors ensuring SMS’s are tailored to individual needs. Counsellors are available seven days a week and attempt to respond to all SMS’s received within 24 hours. Only during campaign periods, will automated SMS’s be sent out to the user base according to their profile. Knowledge-based questions that are posted to counsellors are used to inform wider campaigns that UNICEF runs on SMS, radio and TV. The service links to and is supported by the CHAMP toll free phone number (990) for counselling over the phone, which is particularly useful for those only speaking local languages, and also for emergency advice.

Emergency key words have also been built into the platform from the very beginning - so if a user sends a message that has the words, rape, abuse, defiled, or similar it is flagged in red, and goes straight to the top of the counsellor's pending messages. An automated response is sent (in case the counsellor is not immediately available to respond) saying “please call 990 now and talk to somebody”.

Robust quality assurance of SMS counseling is achieved through close work with the NAC, who monitor and “sign off” final wording of messaging to ensure factual correctness (CHECK).

#### Approach:

Specifically in regard to VMMC, a customized SMS will be sent out on a weekly basis to male groups. (Females will be sent something similar encouraging them to support their males in VMMC take up.)

1. **Attitude SMS** - targeting positive and negative attitudes toward VMMC, aiming to:  
Increase self HIV risk awareness  
Increase knowledge of VMMC benefits  
Address key misconceptions about VMMC
2. **Self confidence building SMS**, aiming to:  
Increase knowledge of VMMC procedure  
Address pain management  
Effective referral (Place/Time/free procedure)
3. **Booster SMS** - motivating uptake and counselor engagement through social norm influencers, e.g. Celebrity or Traditional Leader motivational SMS targeting social norms/motivating engagement with counselors

#### **Rationale/theory of change**

##### SMS rationale

UNICEF cites increasing evidence from recent experiences supporting effectiveness of SMS as a catalyst for HIV education, and broader health promotion among adolescents and youths.<sup>1</sup> This evidence shows significant change on level of HIV prevention knowledge, adoption of safer reproductive health and sexual behaviours including reducing sexual partners, increased uptake of condom use, and increased uptake of STI/HIV testing.

##### Behavior change rationale

UNICEF believes the the SMS approach detailed above feeds into the participant’s decision-making stages as follows:

A- Pre-contemplation (No intention to go for VMMC)

B- Contemplation (Intention to go for VMMC in the future)

C- Preparation (Intention to go for VMMC in near future and step taken towards that goal)

And finally

D – Action – Participant’s uptake of VMMC

In UNICEF’s conceptual framework for the project, the Action stage (D) is also affected by a series of secondary moderators: e.g. distance to VMMC site; cost of transport; opportunity cost (time away from work/school); education level; cultural background; peers (circumcised) influence and parental/partner support.

Decision-making stages A-C will therefore be principally moderated by engagement in two-way interaction with a health counselor via SMS. This ensures a very personal interaction with U-reporters. UNICEF have found some questions received during the pilot have been really sensitive and personal, and so it is important that the U-reporter can use the same individual counsellor and exchange messages as if with a peer/friend as opposed to a random or generic message service.

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<sup>1</sup> Megan S C Lim, Jane S Hocking, et al. **Impact of text and email messaging on the sexual health of young people: a randomized controlled trial**, J Epidemiol Community Health 2012;66:69e74. doi:10.1136/jech.2009.100396

Kelly L. L’Engle, Heather L. Vahdat, Elizabeth Ndakidemi et al. **Evaluating feasibility, reach and potential impact of a text message family planning information service in Tanzania**, Contraception (2012) (in-press)

Gold et al. **Determining the Impact of Text Messaging for Sexual Health Promotion to Young People**. Sexually Transmitted Diseases ; Volume 38, Number 4, April 2011

J. Gold1,2\*, C. K. Aitken, et al. **Mobile advertising to promote safer sex and sun safety**, Health Education Research, March 29, 2011

UNICEF has also mapped a “decision journey” based on the individual experiences of U-Reporters towards demanding a given intervention (e.g. VMMC and HTC). The U-Reporter journey is not always a linear trajectory, and UNICEF uses the “Five Stages of Changes” model based on the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) of behavior change:



UNICEF addresses this decision journey by tailoring messages to individual needs at different stages, made possible by the flexible, personalized and age/gender sensitive methodology employed by the counsellors.

## **DEMAND CREATION ACTIVITIES**

### **Demand Creation Activities**

#### **1) Intervention components**

Key activities for VMMC have been split into two parts – 1) Program implementation activities and 2) Evaluation activities.

Implementation activities include:

- Organization of a design workshop to develop prototypes for SMS package of intervention. This was held in October 2012, see more details on this below.
- Test and validate the SMS package of intervention (select the best prototype for the intervention)
- Develop an SMS counseling curriculum for VMMC
- Organize an orientation on VMMC for the SMS counselors
- Conduct community mobilization to increase enrollment of young people on the Zambia U-Report SMS platform (using local radio/TV and celebrity, using rad show in underprivileged areas)
- Conduct the mapping of the supply of VMMC in Lusaka province (including site specific schedule-day/hours of operation). This is so that the SMS service can be customized for very localized service

drives – e.g. if a local clinic is providing VMMC services and knows how many clients it can realistically operate on during its tenure, an SMS can be sent out to a particular number of U-Reporters, ensuring uptake is driven in a very targeted way.

- Customize the Zambia U-Report IT platform for the VMMC intervention
- Hire staff for the program implementation (2 SMS counselors, 1 program officer, an IT developer)
- Coordination meetings (monthly with the program team)
- Stakeholders/Study advisory board meeting (quarterly)

#### Proposed evaluation activities will include:

- Protocol development and ethical clearance.
- Field work (data collection)
- Data analysis
- Results validation workshop.
- Dissemination meeting.
- Human resources for impact evaluation

#### Campaigns and Polls

As well as offering advice and information, the SMS service will be used to launch a series of HIV related campaigns and polls, which are aimed at stimulating discussion around certain topics. The first campaign, on HIV Testing & Counseling, was sent out June-July 2013, and VMMC was planned to be the next campaign area to coincide with National MC Month in August (CHECK IF THIS WENT AHEAD).

#### Counsellor Training and Monitoring

UNICEF chose to partner with local NGO CHAMP for the SMS Counselling component, as CHAMP had extensive experience in HIV counselling and could adapt their service to provide all the SMS counselling for the U-Report project. Their counsellors were already trained in terms of technical sexual health expertise, and UNICEF conducted a one-day intensive training course with CHAMP counsellors on using SMS language so they can provide their advice by text. There are presently three counsellors dedicated to U-Report.

Counsellors are monitored by CHAMP supervisors, and refresher training given every 6-months on knowledge-based health issues and latest treatment advice. They are also supplied with support materials such as a manual, which they can refer to if they do not immediately know how to respond to a U-Reporter question.

Managers at UNICEF also have access to the SMS content via a portal, and so they can monitor remotely the messages coming in and going out, UNICEF can and give feedback or updates to counsellors on their SMS responses, but can't send SMS responses themselves.

#### Mass Media Activities

*Pilot radio show:* CHAMP will also produce a pilot radio show, currently running to 8 episodes, to be broadcast weekly on ZNBC radio. The show will be hosted by two celebrities, including singer Pompi and another popular female figure called Hope. They are moving away from the “panel of experts” format, wanting to create a space that is more appropriate for youth audiences.

*Celebrity endorsement:* Zambian celebrities have appeared on TV shows and mentioned U-Report – the service received many more registrations the following day as a result.

#### Social Mobilization - Youth Ambassadors

UNICEF already had a base of young, motivated ‘climate ambassadors’ who were brought on board in 2010 as part of a child participation program. These young ambassadors received training in leadership and communication skills, work-plan development, and HIV. They are the “super connectors” in their communities,

going to schools, youth groups and events to spread campaign messages. There are 1000 across the country, and UNICEF train 200 new ambassadors every year. Some of the original ambassadors are now adults but continue as youth facilitators and carry out the training with the new recruits.

UNICEF felt there was a natural cross over with U-Report, and decided to make the ambassadors the first “U-Reporters”, to go out into their communities to encourage friends and peers to take up the SMS service.

These pioneer U-Reporters have achieved a great deal of success. They were highly visible in their t-shirts and full of enthusiasm at the launch events in Lusaka and Kitwe (Copperbelt), persuading hundred of Y&A to sign up (CHECK).

#### U-Report Design Process

The youth ambassadors have also been closely involved in the U-Report design phase - to ensure young opinions and voices are reflected in the project, particularly when it comes to the effectiveness and impact of messaging and text polls designed for young people.

Ambassadors have attended stakeholders meetings to give their feedback. UNICEF regularly convenes a subgroup of 20 ambassadors to consult on messages, checking on ways to rephrase the medical message to interest and inspire young people. A notable example was the first text poll was a bit “flat and boring” for the ambassadors, who suggested ways to make it more appealing to people of their age group.

At the U-Report Design Workshop in October 2012, UNICEF ensured more than 50% of the delegation was made of young people. During the three days, the delegates came up with objectives, a results framework and sample messages. Groups were organised into age categories: below 24, 24-29 and above 30. These were then asked what kind of message they would want to receive if they were being persuaded to go for VMMC.

#### Case Study - U-Reporters Peter, Frisco, Natasha and Bianca:

Peter, one of the pioneer U-Reporters says he saw their role in the design process to make U-Report more Zambian, and specifically more relevant to Zambian youth. U-Report is an idea from UNICEF Uganda where it is used as a wider platform for many youth issues, so Peter felt strongly that the youth ambassadors had to make it work to fit their context, and make it their own.

Peter thinks youth input on messaging is crucial. He talked to peers and friends throughout the process to get second opinions on how “cool” and therefore motivating the messages were, and to see their initial reactions to the new program. He is convinced that to appeal to young people, the medical message, however important, cannot come across as boring, or they will switch off. He made this point very strongly at the design conference. An example of making the message young and fun is how deal with the myth that men are fully protected from HIV once they’ve had VMMC. The ambassadors came up with the message: “Peel it, but still cover it.”



*Natasha, Peter, Bianca and Frisco - pioneer U-Reporters*

Frisco, another U-Reporter, is still at school and so uses his time outside of lessons to promote U-Report. He goes to school clubs and markets, to hand out flyers talk to young people, who he says are always very interested in the wrist bands and t-shirts the U-Reporters wear. Often he gets asked where he got his t-shirt, and if they can do his job?! Wrist bands have been particularly popular with young people who sign up and wear their wrist band with pride. Frisco also regularly uses social media to promote U-Report and will post Frisco personally finds talking to groups is more effective as he gets asked different questions which everyone can listen to.

Bianca has had several “success” stories during her time as a U-Reporter. Her friend has recently gone for HIV testing as a result of joining the SMS service. She thinks the launch event was an effective way to spread the word, she gave out hundreds of flyers and even got quizzed about the project on the bus on the way home. This sparked a big group discussion and the bus driver put her poster up. She had people joining U-Report on the spot as a result of the discussion.

#### Youth Ambassadors and Social Media

One of the benefits of bringing on the young climate ambassadors is that they have been able to share U-Report with their contacts at climate change youth organisations, who have started posting on their social media pages. The Youth Ambassadors have run their own social media drives too, i.e. 'Catch the U-Report fever on our Facebook pages' - the first five respondents get a U-Report hamper (which is a t-shirt, a wristband).

### EVALUATION OF DEMAND CREATION

#### **Evaluation of Demand Creation**

IDInsight will partner with UNICEF as joint principal investigator on the project’s impact evaluation activities. UNICEF has detailed a number of proposed outcome results which will be measured by a baseline, mid-point and end-line survey.

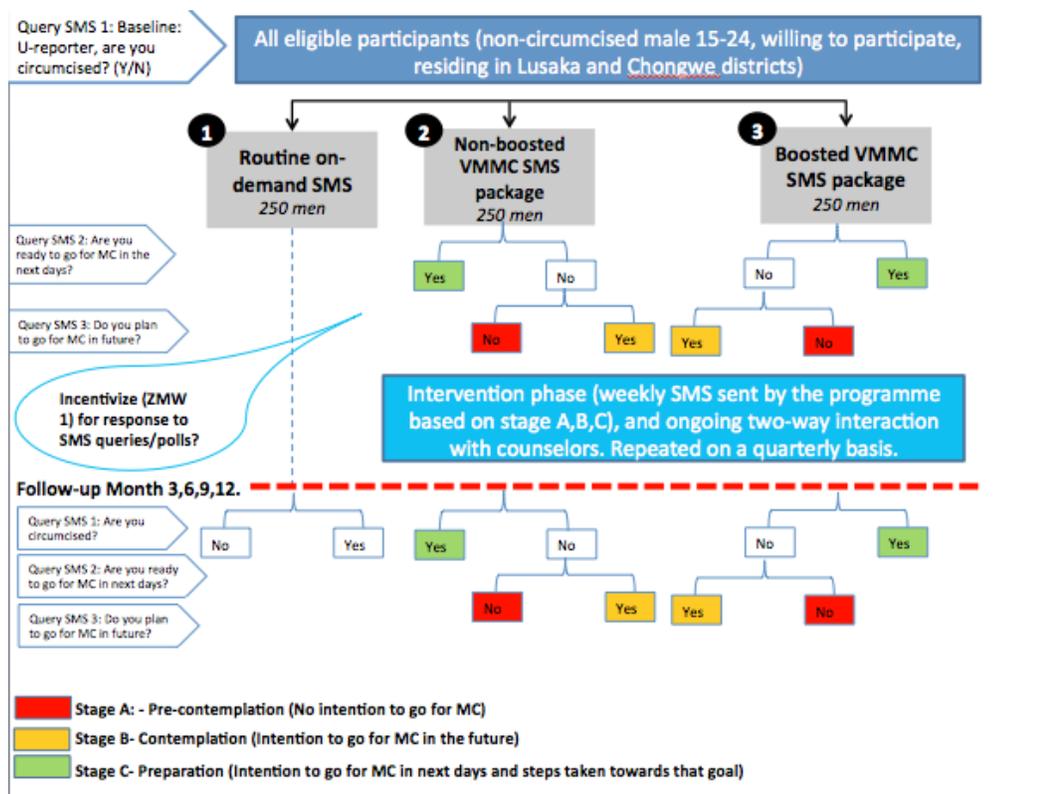
In regard to HIV behaviours:

1) U-Reporters adopt HIV preventative behaviours and double uptake of high impact HIV prevention services (HTC, condoms, VMMC, ART).

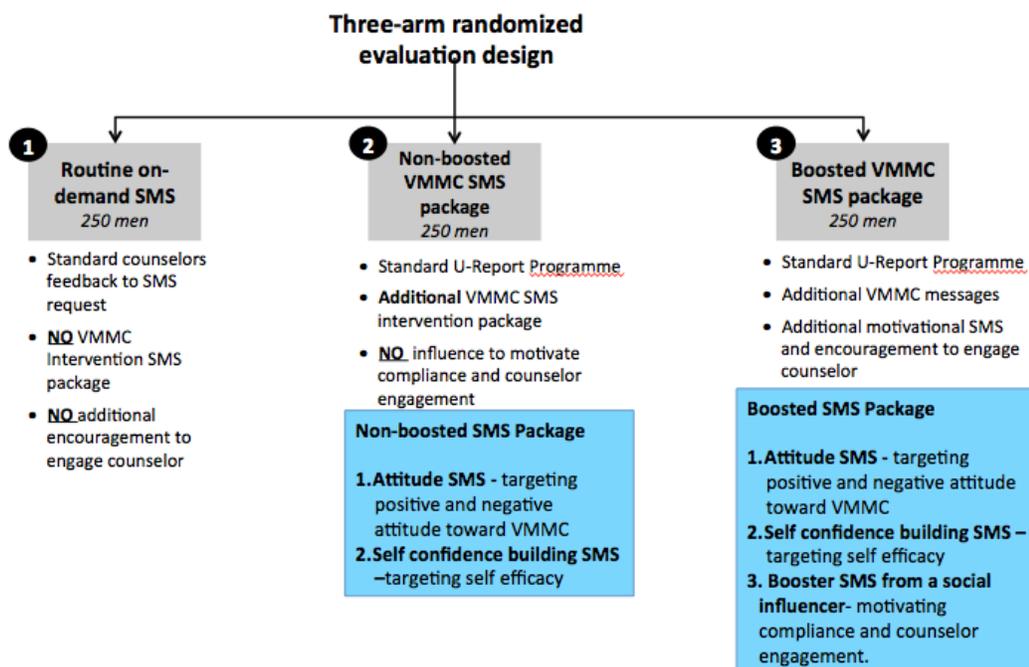
In regard to VMMC:

- 1) A functional SMS package of intervention with or without engagement of SMS counsellor (two-way intervention) to increase demand for VMMC among youth males 15-30 years;
- 2) Increased demand for VMMC by 3 times among participants receiving the tailored VMMC SMS package plus SMS counselling. (CHECK)

UNICEF and ID-insight (check) have also designed a baseline survey to be conducted in the VMMC pilot districts:



Also in specific regard to VMMC, UNICEF (and ID insight?) have designed a 3-arm randomized evaluation design to examine the effects of providing information and counseling via SMS on VMMC uptake, whereby 250 men in each “arm” are sent different types of SMS package. One doesn’t contain any VMMC information, the second contains some attitude and confidence building information on VMMC, and the third contains these elements plus a booster SMS from a social influencer. (CHECK IF THIS HAS BEEN DONE OR TBC)



These evaluative processes are underway but not complete (check)

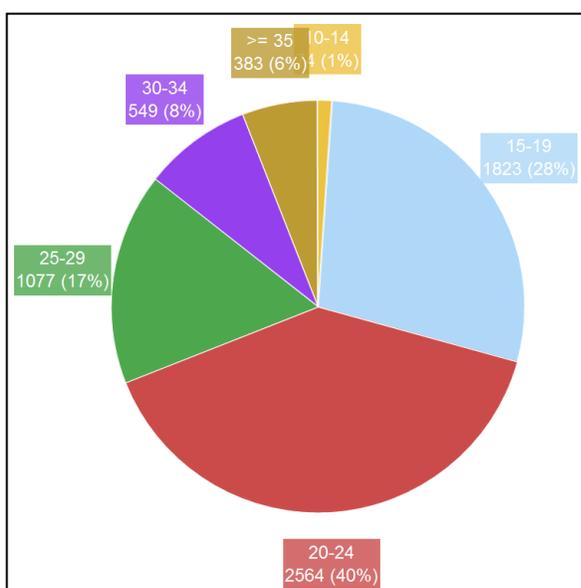
However there are a number of key questions that UNICEF has identified which it seeks to answer through the project's evaluative processes:

- What is the impact of providing VMMC information (non-boosted VMMC SMS package) via two-way interactive SMS on VMMC uptake?
- What is the impact of motivating VMMC counseling engagement via SMS (boosted VMMC SMS package) on VMMC uptake?
- What is the level of satisfaction of participants with the intervention in relation to SMS package (timing, number and frequency, attractiveness, friendliness, length, informative content, supportive, motivational)
- What is the level of satisfaction of participants with quality of SMS counseling (timeliness, supportive, friendliness, motivational, efficiency of referral, post VMMC follow-up/support),
- What are the problems participants faced through mobile phone support and reasons why participants did not engage with counselors or did not respond to inquiry messages;
- What are the factors associated with readiness to uptake VMMC and not getting circumcised;
- What are participants' perceptions of the intervention biggest barriers and greatest benefits.

### Results so far

- Over ten thousand U-Reporters have registered since December 2012
- 64% of these have already engaged in interactions with the counsellors.

- 28,293 SMSs have been received.
- From an analysis of thematic issues from 13,000 SMS requests sent by U-reporters in Zambia (Dec 2012-May 2013), 12% of were related directly to VMMC, the third most popular topic. Most questions were on the symptoms of HIV and AIDs (19%), closely followed by modes of transmission (18%). PMTCT, masturbation, and condom use were also frequently asked about.
- Registration peaked at launching events, during the ZNBC TV show “Smooth Talk” featuring a Brothers for Life celebrity talking about U-Report, and after outreach activities in schools.
- UNICEF has been able to build a demographic profile of the people registering. Just over half (55%) are male. While the majority group of U-Reporters are 15-19 year olds, 17% are aged 25-29, and a further 14% above 30 years old.



*U-Reporters Registration profile by sex and age, Dec 1<sup>st</sup> 2012-May 24<sup>th</sup> 2013, Zambia (n=6549)*

- UNICEF has also analyzed the messages received about VMMC, which reveals 44% of responders were interested in the effectiveness of VMMC against HIV/AIDS, 18% were interested in healing times and 15% in the effectiveness against other STI’s. Pain and medication made up 11% of the messaging.

### **Successes/ Challenges**

- Inviting young people to design and consult on the project is key to its success. Youth Ambassadors, now the front-line U-Reporters have been able to bring in their skills from working on previous UNICEF projects to help mould the messaging and work plan in the most engaging way, and make U-Report their own.

- U-Reporters we met emphasised how crucial the t-shirts, arm bands and other branded materials had been in attracting attention and ultimately helping people sign up for the service. However they feel they need more flyers and t-shirts in different languages to be able to reach out to everyone they'd like to, as it can be a challenge trying to explain it all in English.

### **Challenges and their mitigation**

- Sending SMS's in vernacular language can be is tricky and the counsellors have on occasion been able to text back in the other main languages such as Bemba, but this is not easy to do. To counter the language issue, UNICEF stress the importance of having a toll-free phone number in tandem for people to use and talk to a counsellor direct. Counsellors will usually speak at least one of the seven main local languages.
- Getting to grips with 'Text Speak' is an area UNICEF would like to explore further if the project goes beyond the pilot phase. Counsellors sometimes have trouble deciphering the language people are writing in, and they want to be able to respond in a similar way in order to be credible with their audience. UNICEF don't have a strategic approach to this yet - but it is on the agenda for phase 2.
- Messaging is not currently "templated" but it is hoped that once the service is established, there will be some popular questions that a template response may be appropriate for, as if the service scales up, it may be impossible for all texts to be responded to with tailored messages.