

Mobile Literacy Programme in Afghanistan

Summary: Despite improved economic stability, life expectancy and gender equality and access to education, Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world- **approx. 43.1% for men, and only 12.6% for women**- a consequence of repressive governmental regime and long periods of war. Historically, women have been marginalized in the society and denied the right of access to schools, which has resulted in a **large deficit of literacy and vocational skills**. However, mobile penetration in the country has surged from less than 1% in 2001 to over 18 million active mobile subscriptions in 2012, **with almost 90% of Afghans having access to mobile network services**. This has prompted several organizations to leverage the extensive telecom infrastructure for the design and implementation of various socio-economic interventions focused on marginalized communities such as delivering medical expertise to rural clinics through mobile apps, providing farmers with market intelligence data, and extending financial/credit services. Another prominent example is the **Mobile Literacy Programme in Afghanistan**, which was a one-year pilot project aimed at disseminating literacy skills to communities, targeted at women specifically, through a combination of classroom learning/teaching and mobile technology.

Objectives and Rationale:

- Providing mobile technology to women participants to reinforce classroom engagement and promote the continuous development of literacy skills outside the classroom.
- Empower women living in rural villages of Afghanistan by and by enabling them with mobile/digital literacy and providing them with a means of communication with peers and family.

Key Stakeholders:

The programme was undertaken by the Afghan Institute for Learning (AIL) in collaboration with Creating Hope International. Additional program partners included The US Afghan Women's Council (USAWC) and UNESCO.

Implementation Strategy:

The Mobile Literacy Programme was implemented jointly with the AIL literacy course in two villages at AIL's Learning Centres, which originated in Afghan refugee camps in 2002, and provide various educational courses- from vocational education courses such as sewing, carpet weaving etc. to teacher training and professional development courses. The pilot project **covered 25 women in each the AIL Learning Centres of the two villages, thereby covering a total of 50 women**. It was designed to cover the literacy curriculum of AIL **in four months, which otherwise required an average of 9 months to complete**. These centres/villages were selected by AIL based on the **robust community convergence** that is prevalent in each of the villages, which accelerated the implementation of literacy projects, and their close geographical proximity ensured consistent communication between the staff. The mobile literacy learners ranged from **14-32 years old, comprising rural women who had inhabited the area for generations**.

Based on the aid received from AIL, the first Mobile Literacy Learning Centre commenced, offering three classes of literacy, Arabic and sewing. Motivated by the success of the

Learning Centre, another Learning Centre was instituted in a nearby village through financial and training support from the AIL from 2006.

The Mobile Literacy Programme implemented in the two villages was premised on the principle that the classroom-based literacy teaching, which used standardized methods of traditional reading/writing in classes, would be **reinforced through mobile based learning outside the classroom, thus catalysing the pace at which literacy skills were attained and internalized**. To this end, **mobile phones and texting cards were allocated to each of the female learners** and many different kinds of literacy tasks were sent to the learners as mobile messages to reinforce their reading and writing skills. These included tasks such as 'fill in the blank' sentences, wherein learners were asked to rewrite the sentence with the word filled in, thus ensuring that sentences were properly read and practiced and that the missing word was found. Another task was to restructure sentences to ensure grammatical correctness, thereby enhancing the reading comprehension and grammar skills of learners. Additionally, open-ended questions designed to enable critical thinking and writing skills, were also asked. **The students attended their literacy class six days a week for four months and sent an average of 1,750 messages over the course of the programme, by using their mobile phones every day**. The technology was used for **both completion of literacy tasks and communication with peers**, thereby entrenching the practice of literacy skills in daily life and socialisation.

Learners were enthusiastic about harnessing mobile technology to supplement their classroom learning and experienced teachers mentored them to bridge their literacy learning in and outside the classroom. The fast-paced progress and positive feedback on their developing literacy skills was very encouraging for the students and they came to perceive literacy as a useful lifelong skill or tool rather than a task that yielded no clear benefit.

The implementation of **pre and post-tests** ensured effective monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the programme and student progress. The post-test tested the ability of students to devise both short and long answers to specific questions (i.e. Who do you respect and why? / What did you do this morning), as compared to their ability prior to the project. This served as a more practical gauge of the learner's literacy skills rather than seeking exact meaning or spelling or words.

Resources:

The human resources for this project included **two experienced literacy teachers along with a project leader based in the AIL Central Office, as well as a dedicated supervisor for each Learning Centre**. With respect to ICT, all students were given a **mobile phone with enough credit** provided to complete the literacy assignments. The use of established venues and experienced staff was a key success factor of this community led programme.

Impact:

At the end of four months of literacy training, **83% of students** were able to complete the final post- test using correct sentence structure and vocabulary, fulfilling the requirements for progression to literacy level three in accordance with the Afghan government curriculum. Several learners who commenced the course with a non-existent or very basic level of literacy progressed significantly, which also included learners who even managed to attain the ability to read magazines and newspapers. The results of the project demonstrated that

a literacy level that normally takes nine months to achieve **could instead be reached in two months with the integration of mobile phones.**

Students who participated in this programme have requested that it be expanded to all literacy courses and other AIL centres. There are now 83 literacy students waiting for the next batch Literacy Mobile Programme to commence.

Other indicators of programme's success include:

- Rise in the number of girls and their families interested in participating in the programme (as evident from the waiting list of 83 students for the next programme).
- All 50 students sustained the entire duration of the programme.
- Increase in critical thinking skills, as reflected by questions posed to the participants in post and pre-tests.
- Increase in the use of mobile phones for interpersonal communications and practical daily literacy, alongside a diffusion of skills into the girls' families, who also began to use cell phones based on training from their daughter

Challenges:

- Retaining qualified and experienced teachers/ trainers is a major challenge as they do not receive any remuneration, especially in rural areas which suffer from shortfall of committed and qualified trainers. This issue has led to high staff turn-over, which can affect the quality and continuity of the programme.
- Programme's financial sustainability is inadequate as funding support from sponsors, combined with membership fees and the sale of learning materials, is insufficient to meet the programme's annual costs.
- Cultural barriers/Stigma impeding women's use and adoption of ICT and literacy classes.

Lessons Learnt:

- The pre-existing professional expertise and institutional stability of the people working for the Mobile Literacy Programme was a crucial aspect of its success. Given the experience of the teachers, no additional teacher training materials were required, aside from the list of questions to send participants through text messaging.
- A close teacher/mentor-student working relationship and teachers who were committed to AIL's mission allowed these individuals to build strong community and family acceptance of the mobile literacy programme, the value of technology-mediated instruction and learning, and the overall benefits of literacy and education for women and girls.

Replicability and Sustainability:

The results of the Mobile Literacy Programme have indicated great implementation success and potential for further literacy programmes to use this approach. **Given the enthusiasm and commitment of the learners, it can be scaled up** provided adequate **long term technical and financial support is rendered by programme sponsors/partners** to ensure consistent provision of ICT/mobile resources, as well as teacher training and fixed remuneration/salaries for their sustained participation. Concerted outreach efforts and community advocacy campaigns to break down the social stigmas and cultural barriers

attached to illiteracy are equally necessary for the social sustainability of the programme and long-term demand and participation of beneficiaries.