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Foreword

The remarkable proliferation of mobile technology across the world in recent years has provided the global health community with an opportunity to strengthen health systems through interventions that increase both quality and coverage. Awareness is growing of the ways in which mobile health (mHealth) innovations can catalyse the implementation of proven health interventions that target health systems, health facilities, health workers and clients.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has played a leading role in guiding the efforts to generate and document evidence in this growing field, as well as in developing resources and capacity. By serving as the Secretariat for the mHealth Technical and Evidence Review Group for Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, it works to identify mHealth innovations that have been shown to add value to health systems. Additionally, through its collaboration with the United Nations Foundation (UNF) on the Every Woman Every Child Innovation Working Group (IWG) catalytic mHealth grant programme for maternal, newborn and child health, WHO leads the provision of technical and research support to 26 mHealth projects in 15 countries. Through this work, WHO has come to recognize the need for a practical tool to help mHealth project implementers engage with mobile network operators (MNOs). This guide answers that need: as the product of a collaboration between WHO and the Groupe Speciale Mobile Association (GSMA), it aims to help mHealth implementers scale up their initiatives for greater impact.

Innovations in mHealth happen where the public and private sectors intersect. For many mHealth implementers, navigating engagement with MNOs is a daunting but valuable experience, and successful partnerships can contribute enormously to the long-term sustainability of an mHealth solution. This guide presents an overview of the benefits and challenges of engaging with MNOs in the context of mHealth, and describes practical strategies that mHealth implementers can use when considering this kind of partnership. A key aim of this guide is to demonstrate to mHealth implementers what the value of their mHealth solutions can be for the private sector – and how this value can be leveraged when negotiating a mutually beneficial partnership with an MNO.

This guide reflects the diversity of relationships between mHealth implementers and MNOs, while providing unique insights into the perspective of private-sector partners. Public–private partnerships are especially crucial in the health sector because the mobile infrastructure is an integral part of mHealth solutions, which have been shown to contribute greatly to improvements in community health. Therefore, organizations seeking to implement successful and sustainable mHealth initiatives must learn how to facilitate productive and lasting partnerships with MNOs. We hope that this guide will provide health partners with the insights they need to determine whether their efforts and goals can be aligned with those of MNOs, and thus help them to initiate or strengthen partnerships that can achieve a shared vision of better health.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CHAI	Clinton Health Access Initiative
CHW	Community Health Worker
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
EWEC	Every Woman Every Child
GSMA	Groupe Speciale Mobile Association
ICT	information and communication technology
IWG	Innovation Working Group
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
mHealth	Mobile health
MNO	Mobile Network Operator
MTN	MTN Group is a leading emerging markets MNO, with its head office in South Africa
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
SMS	Short Message Service
USSD	Unstructured Supplementary Service Data
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

The field of mobile health (mHealth) is experiencing a real need for guidance on public–private partnerships among players as diverse as the mobile industry, technology vendors, government stakeholders and mHealth service providers. This guide provides a practical resource for mHealth service providers (e.g. developers and implementers) to partner more strategically with one of these critical players – the mobile network operators (MNOs).[1] Despite the growing literature on how to develop partnerships, there is a lack of clear, practical strategies for the health community to engage with MNOs to better scale up mHealth services.

Notable challenges to engaging with MNOs are divergent motivators, reluctance to take on risks, and availability of resources and investment opportunities. For example, while mHealth service providers focus primarily on the health system outputs of an mHealth service and lower access costs for clients, MNOs must consider financial and marketing interests common to private-sector stakeholders. In addition to creating social impact, the motivation for MNOs includes differentiating their brand from competitors, effectively using their information and communication technologies and corporate capabilities, and developing alternative revenue streams from traditional voice and data services.

For effective and sustained collaboration, MNOs and mHealth service providers need to understand the value that each party brings to the partnership. For instance, MNOs can raise critical questions regarding the magnitude and visibility of the health problem, the demographics and mobile phone usage of the MNO subscriber base, the type of technology capacity required, and the opportunities for diversifying or expanding revenue. mHealth service providers should also explore the MNO's assets, including: their connectivity capabilities (e.g. transmission of voice, text and data exchange); their support infrastructure (e.g. their ability to handle billing services, track usage and provide customer support); their business infrastructure (e.g. powerful brand and effective marketing); and funding mechanisms (e.g. corporate social responsibility to finance mHealth efforts). Lastly, mHealth service providers should consider whether direct engagement with MNOs is the most effective way to access the mobile capabilities they require, or if intermediaries such as mobile aggregators may be more appropriate.

This document distils best practices and industry-wide lessons by providing key motivators, challenges and recommendations for mHealth service providers to engage with MNOs for scaling up their initiatives.

1 Also known as mobile, wireless or cellular service providers, carriers or companies.

1

Introduction

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