



➔ Call centers provide needed health information and services in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Nigeria



Focus Area: Health

Service Provided:

- Optimization and Institutionalization
- Partner Negotiation
- Business Operations Integration
- Training and Maintenance Programs

Partners:

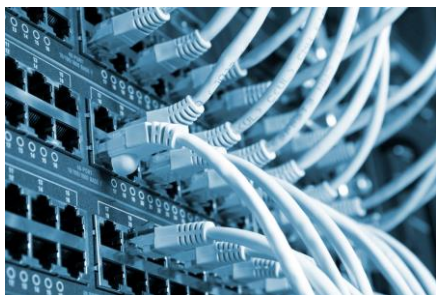
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- Society for Family Health (SFH)

Expansion and Implementation Support for a Health-focused Call Center in Nigeria

Challenge

A call center in Gombe, a northern state in Nigeria, provides much-needed health services for midwives and expectant mothers. It is part of a larger set of interventions run by a pan-African health NGO. In 2009, the NGO created the center with resources, vision, and enthusiasm, but after a couple of years in operation, the center was experiencing a number of technical and operational challenges. And, Gombe was becoming a dangerous place. The NGO couldn't send foreign technical personnel to the center, and even sending support people from southern Nigeria was risky.

The NGO tapped Vital Wave to first evaluate the call center's technology, services, and operations, and then provide support to correct the issues found. The ultimate aim was to expand the call center's services to other geographies and other health issues.



➔ Limited capacity is one of the most common challenges to scaling ICT interventions.

The ability to address technical issues as well as non-technical challenges – such as partner negotiation, training, and change management -- is critical to the success and scale of ICT4D.

The evaluation phase included a detailed review of technical systems and operational processes. Vital Wave identified several critical technical issues: Internet service was weak; hardware and software were outdated; and caller ID, patient tracking, and a toll-free service did not work. Vital Wave also discovered gaps in business processes. Effective operations were hampered by faulty billing software and ineffective account management. The Center did not have a single point of contact at the local phone companies, and there was no service level agreement (SLA) in place with service providers. As a result, the rights and responsibilities of each partner were unclear. Finally, there was a disconnect between health data needs and system functionality – a major concern of the organization's COO. These issues negatively impacted continuity of care, discouraged people from calling, and decreased the center's credibility.

Solution

Vital Wave took a phased approach to fixing problems and training call center staff. The first priority was to improve Internet access, which required replacing equipment (new PBX and gateway equipment, headsets, and software). This allowed the project team to bring in more specialized technical experts and make other system modifications remotely – an important consideration as the security situation deteriorated. Technical systems such as caller ID, patient tracking, and toll-free calling were restored through a combination of software upgrades and diligent troubleshooting with service providers.

Next, Vital Wave addressed the issue of limited capacity – commonly the single biggest concern when implementing ICT4D at scale in developing countries. The call center was the sponsoring NGO's first ICT-related project, and one of the challenges was that *they didn't know what they didn't know*. Among the center's staff, the ability to fix technical issues and amend business processes was lacking. Vital Wave worked closely with the COO to identify operational problems and devise strategies for fixing them. A business analyst was brought in to translate required functions into technical specifications. SLAs were created for technology partners, and relationships were revived with Nigerian mobile network operators. The software at agent terminals was upgraded and training modules were developed for center staff to learn new systems and processes.

Results

The Gombe call center project succeeded on two levels. Technical and operational problems were identified and corrected, and within a year the call center's technology and services were optimized. The long-term goal of expanding the call center to other geographies has been delayed by the security situation in Northern Nigeria, but the planned expansion of health service areas is progressing. The sponsoring NGO reports that call volumes are steadily increasing and the call center is hiring new agents to cover the additional volume. The Gombe call center project is an excellent illustration of how, on the surface, primary concerns are technical, but to truly achieve sustainable growth it is first necessary to address more complex non-technical issues like security, business processes, and limited capacity.