

Use of a Virtual Collaboration System to Support Sharing Effective Practices in Reproductive Health

Paper Included with Presentation at World Conference on E-Learning.
October 24-28, 2005, Vancouver, Canada

Margaret A. D'Adamo, MLS, MSB. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, INFO Project, USA. mdadamo@jhucpp.org

William Finger, MSW. Family Health International/ YouthNet, USA. bfinger@fhi.org

Abstract:

The Implementing Best Practices Initiative has developed an online tool designed to improve utilization of evidence-based materials and effective practices in reproductive health. It is called the Electronic Communication System or ECS. The ECS allows users to create and manage virtual communities, share and edit documents, brainstorm, and conduct online meetings. It was designed and vetted collaboratively and functions through both email and the web. Its goal is to promote knowledge sharing and encourage country-to-country information exchange. It facilitates access to publications through a global community and provides virtual workspaces for smaller groups to share ideas, experiences, success stories and lessons learned. In 2005 YouthNet and INFO joined to sponsor an online discussion series on adolescent reproductive health through the ECS. This paper will review the purpose of the forum, how it was organized, the results of a participant evaluation, lessons learned, and future plans for similar online seminars.

The goal of the Implementing Best Practices (IBP) Initiative, which was founded by WHO and USAID and is supported by 21 partner organizations, is to identify, adapt, and support the use of best practices in reproductive health. The IBP Initiative also works to promote collaborative learning and knowledge sharing through its own online collaboration system, which is called the IBP Electronic Communication System or ECS. The ECS is a web-based, password-protected system open to anyone working in reproductive health worldwide. Everyone who joins becomes a member of the *Global Community*, which has an online library of over 500 full text reports, manuals, guidelines and tools contributed by IBP partners. Weekly announcements to the Global Community highlight new publications, upcoming conferences and meetings, and IBP activities. ECS members can also create and manage their own virtual communities. Each community has its own library where members can store and edit documents. Each community can also conduct discussions online and via e-mail, schedule web-based meetings, create shared contacts lists, maintain a group calendar, and schedule tasks for individual members. ECS Members have their own 'home page' called MyIBP which displays recent postings in their communities, upcoming events, tasks and bookmarked items. The ECS can be accessed from anywhere – home, office or

internet cafe. It promotes the aims of the IBP Initiative by making access to existing best practices in reproductive health easier. It also provides an opportunity to network with experts, and share their own ideas, successes, experiences, and lessons learned.

The ECS was designed and vetted by the World Health Organization Division of Reproductive Health and Research (WHO/RHR) and, the IBP Initiative through a collaborative process. It was launched at a regional IBP meeting in Uganda in June 2004. The ECS currently supports over 2,400 individual members and over 100 different online communities. Communities range from small teams who have come together to write a report or plan a meeting to larger groups who want a means to communicate with each other on a specific issue or topic after attending a workshop, event, or conference. The ECS is hosted by a private contractor in Switzerland and co-managed by a team representing several divisions at WHO and The INFO Project. INFO collaborates with WHO on managing the ECS as part of its contribution to the IBP Initiative.

In March-April of 2005 two IBP partner organizations, YouthNet/Family Health International and The INFO Project which is part of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for Communication Programs, joined to organize and sponsor an online discussion series on adolescent reproductive health through the ECS. The forum was planned to last for one month and was designed to provide state-of-the-art information and an opportunity for connecting global best practices with country-based experiences in work on pregnancy prevention among young people. It was also intended to help launch an online community of practice on youth and adolescent reproductive health within the IBP Electronic Communication System. The forum was titled *Youth Pregnancy Prevention in a Time of HIV/AIDS*.

Beginning about one month prior to the start date, YouthNet and INFO began to promote the forum widely through electronic discussion groups and e-newsletters. Both organizations featured the forum on their respective web sites and fliers promoting the forum were distributed to participants at a workshop in Ghana. Participants included a range of people interested in adolescent health – recognized subject experts, program managers, and providers in the field. As a result, participation exceeded initial expectations. We had hoped for 500 participants. More than 650 people from 86 countries joined the forum and received the postings. The majority of them (all but about [need the number of] people) were new to both IBP and the Electronic Communication System. During the one-month forum, 87 people from 32 countries (28 of them developing countries) made a total of 129 postings. The postings were combined and sent out as eighteen daily digests on weekdays. In addition each participant received an e-mail when they signed up, a pre-forum e-mail explaining how the forum would work, a welcome e-mail on the first day, weekly introductory e-mails and a final summary. People continued to sign up during the forum and the moderators brought them up to speed on discussion by forwarding them the weekly introductory and summary e-mails.

The overall goal of the discussion series was to provide participants with state-of-the-art information on reproductive health and an opportunity for synergy between sharing global best practices and country-based experiences – sharing best practices and successful strategies to apply those practices in real programs. For the IBP Initiative and INFO an important goal was to stimulate participation in the *Youth and Adolescents* community in the IBP Electronic Communication System. Everyone who signed up to participate in the forum also became a

registered member of that community. Our hope was that they would continue to have virtual discussions on many of the same issues that had been raised during the forum. IBP also wanted to experiment with techniques, such as a structured online seminar, for facilitating discussion among a large, distributed group of people. YouthNet hoped to reach more people through the seminar than they could effectively reach at conferences, meetings and workshops. They also hoped to engage a global audience in a discussion of “global best practices” informed by local experience. We all wanted to show, through interviews conducted after the forum ended, that the forum had an impact on program development and implementation in the field.

Each week, a new guest panelist introduced that week’s topic, suggested related readings, and posed questions for discussion. INFO and YouthNet hoped that having guest panelists would bring in additional participants who wanted an opportunity to engage in dialogue with a recognized expert in the field. All responses were compiled into a daily digest e-mail. The digest included an overview, comments from the expert, and the individual postings from forum members. The forum moderators also tried to synthesize key themes and lessons learned in the digest e-mails. Behind the scenes staff from INFO and YouthNet handled the logistics of helping people sign up, assembling the postings, and creating each daily digest e-mail. In addition to being archived in the *Youth and Adolescents* community on the ECS, all forum postings are also archived on the YouthNet website

(<http://www.fhi.org/en/Youth/YouthNet/Publications/prevforum/index.htm>) beginning with the welcome message and going through every posting in sequence until the final summary. The Forum Summary, which is the final posting, includes a compilation of all the resources mentioned during the four weeks, with links, as well as a summary of the results of the forum evaluation.

The first week (March 15-21) covered the needs of youth for pregnancy prevention. The featured guest panelist was Ward Cates, President of the Institute for Family Health, Family Health International. Week 2 (March 22-28) focused on young women and girls. The featured guest panelist was Lynn Collins, Technical Advisor HIV/AIDS, UNFPA. Week 3 (March 29-April 4) covered medical barriers and accessibility issues. The featured guest panelist was Jim Shelton, Senior Medical Advisor, U S Agency for International Development. Week 4 (April 5-11) covered the ABCs of pregnancy and HIV prevention among young people with a focus on country perspectives and lessons learned. Several forum participants were asked in advance to contribute comments on this topic. They included Omeire Edward, Edward (Ted) Green, Atanas Kirjakovski, Ann McCauley, Jennifer Nadeau, Julie Pulerwitz, Duanne Punpiputt, Michaelle Soliman, and Julie Wiltshire.

Participants could either read and respond to the postings as e-mails or go online to the Implementing Best Practices Electronic Communication System (www.ibpinitiative.org) to read and respond. In addition, all documents mentioned during the four-week discussion were posted in the online community library. The final forum e-mail contained a complete listing with links to the documents on public web sites and within the ECS.

Evaluation

INFO and YouthNet conducted a short participant evaluation in the form of a survey during the final week of the forum and shared the results with participants in the final forum message. Of

the 654 subscribers to the forum, 73 responded to the survey, an 11% response rate. Respondents came from 37 countries and represented a wide variety of organizations including NGOs, academic and research groups, faith-based organizations, and government agencies.

Overall, respondents felt that the forum was at least partially fulfilling many of its stated goals. The majority of respondents were satisfied (35%) or very satisfied (64%) with the content of the discussion. Most respondents felt there was the right amount of discussion (74%); 16% felt that there was not enough, and 9% said that there was too much discussion.

Virtually all (99%) said the forum definitely or somewhat met its goal of generating meaningful, relevant, and timely conversation about effective practices in adolescent reproductive health.

About half of the respondents posted a message on the forum. Most people (78%) participated in the forum primarily by e-mail, although 6% participated online and 16% used both approaches. About 35% of the participants who went online did report having some problems logging on to the IBP Electronic Communication System, while the other 65% did not.

The majority of participants (59%) forwarded some of the postings, which they found especially useful, to other people.

Most participants preferred the digested e-mail format (82%) over receiving e-mails as they were posted (18%). An overwhelming majority (93%) felt that involving a guest panelist in the discussion each week was useful.

Roughly one third of the respondents (31%) reported already having used resources or practices discussed or recommended in the forum while an additional 49% planned to use them. More than half of the participants (54%) downloaded and read some of the materials recommended or discussed, and another 36% said they planned to do so.

Examples participants gave of how they used or planned to use the materials include:

- "I am working on an AB program and I gained some new insights in behavior communication strategies."

- "The forum has taken place at a time when we have just done the baseline survey for our peer education programme. I used much of the issues raised through the forum to meaningfully contribute to the interpretation of the baseline findings."

- "The information shared about young girls and sugar daddies was especially helpful, as were the question and responses on the ABCs and gender."

Participants also had a number of useful suggestions for improving future discussions, including:

- "Include more practical field base exchange of experiences."

- "Designate e-mail stations or outlets in certain cities where participants could gather and participate."

- "Provide a final summary of the whole discussion and draw some inferences from it."

In September 2005 INFO conducted follow-up interviews by telephone and e-mail with seven developing country participants who had volunteered to be interviewed after the forum end. Respondents were from India, Ghana, Guatemala, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Malawi and the Dominican Republic. They were asked a series of questions about how, and in what manner, were the discussions and information useful in improving their organization's services. They were also asked to share instances in which they actually used resources or practices discussed in the forum or to describe why they had not been able to use any of the practices or resources mentioned. Finally they were asked if they could recommend ways to make similar forums more useful or easier to participate in.

A school counselor from India who participated commented that the discussion provided a good framework for understanding the issues and validating his own experiences. He also appreciated the chance to share with people around the globe. He was able to use some of the resources to improve the content and quality of his work in training in HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support. He suggested that it would be a good strategy to deliberately recruit people working at the grassroots level to future discussions, because there is much to be learned from their experiences. He stated: "While these may not be measurable outcomes, I believe that participating in the discussions helped me to continue with my work with renewed energy and enthusiasm – knowing that I am not alone in facing challenges."

A participant from Ghana also mentioned the excitement of being able, for the first time, to communicate with people from so many different countries. In order to share the discussion, he suggested that the organizers produce a printed summary of the discussion with details on all the resources mentioned. These summaries could be distributed in remote areas to grassroots level workers where they could create the most impact. He suggested that IBP consider creating a portal just for people working with youth, where grassroots projects could be showcased with interviews and photos. On ways to improve future forums, he suggested that the organizers should solicit input on topics from participants in advance and develop the forum agenda in a more collaborative fashion. He further recommended: "This can be something on the lines of profiling how a remote village in Zambia that does not even have electricity, has its own mechanism of dealing with HIV/AIDS, and also carry pictures of such programs."

A participant from Guatemala volunteered that she had used information from the forum to prepare for a leadership training working at the National University of Guatemala. He admitted that language was a big challenge to participating and he was the only person in his organization who spoke English.

A participant from Cameroon said: "The resources and/or practices discussed in the forum have made a real impact on the growth of new initiatives as I continue to develop similar models around my daily work. During my monthly capacity building programs with local AIDS control committees (35 in number), youth groups, associations and community based organizations, I

have been trying to share possible ideas on how to affect change and take action around today's major challenges. . .”

Lessons Learned

IBP and INFO learned that it is extremely difficult to sustain high quality discussion in an online community of 650+ people without a partner like YouthNet to organize, suggest readings, pose questions and summarize. Although there are still over 650 members of the *Youth and Adolescents* community in the ECS, since the forum ended five months ago, very little actual discussion has occurred. The moderators continue to post announcements of new publications and events related to adolescent health. But discussion has not happened spontaneously for a range of reasons. People do not know each other outside the context of the forum. They have never met personally and it's not likely that they ever will. They have no common program or goal. Just as a person may keep in touch with one or two of her former classmates from college, but not the entire group, this group has not spontaneously continued the discussion.

YouthNet learned that in order to organize the kind of high level discussion and circulate quality daily digest e-mails, it took a concerted effort on their part, and a larger chunk of their staff time than originally anticipated. When we planned this first forum, we envisioned that it would be the first of three forums cosponsored by INFO and YouthNet. However, YouthNet decided that, at least for now, they don't have the staff time required to commit to the second and third series, and they are not sure that the return is worth that level of effort.

INFO has learned that it is difficult to find other partners willing to put in as much time and effort as YouthNet was willing to do. We continue to discuss the idea of similar forums with other IBP partner organizations, but have not been able to actually organize another similar forum on a different or related topic yet. We have developed a checklist that outlines the steps required to organize, promote, manage and evaluate an online forum to help other organizations who want to plan similar online forums in the future to learn from our successes and failures.

Acknowledgements

Technical Assistance – Anjali Sanghvi, INFO Project

Editorial Assistance – Tara Kachgal, YouthNet consultant and Ed Scholl, YouthNet who acted as forum moderator

Evaluation Assistance – Saori Ohkubo & Santosh Vijaykumar INFO Project; Claudia Ruland, FHI/YouthNet.

WHO/IBP Liaison – Lou Compernelle