Four Takeaways from the M4D Forum Asia 2015

Across Asia, mobile phone ownership continues to grow, and prices are dropping. This has led to an increase in mobile phone access writ large, and the potential to integrate mobiles into development projects to improve development outcomes clearly exists. In an effort to catalyze conversations and actions aimed at creating a more holistic and inclusive approach to M4D, USAID and FHI 360 hosted the second annual Mobiles for Development Forum Asia in Bangkok on January 20-21, 2015. Whereas the first forum focused more on sharing services and best practices, this year's forum was geared towards big ideas that have the potential to drive lasting and genuinely impactful interventions. The event brought together more than 90 individuals from USAID, development organizations, mobile network operators, technology providers, and others who are passionate for M4D.

Photo Credit: Praiyawee Tontulawat, USAID

Below are four key takeaways from this two-day event:

#1: Design Principles Matter

A common thread throughout the event, particularly highlighted during the M4D and Mobile Financial Services Award presentations, was the importance of designing for your user, and building off of what already exists, where possible. Those M4D initiatives that try to build from scratch and in isolation are those more likely to fail. To avoid these pitfalls, the Greentree Consensus, which consists of nine best-practice guiding principles to inform the design of technology-enabled development programs, was put forward as one such guide. The principles lay out what working with technology means for development practitioners, and underscore that development can be done better if we all support these practices. Read more about the Greentree Consensus here: http://ict4dprinciples.org/

#2: Embracing New Partnerships and New Models Bolsters the Ecosystem

Effective use of mobiles and other communication technologies requires an ecosystem of networks and services. Within this ecosystem, each actor plays a specific role, and together, the actors enable the ecosystem to function. In order to take an ecosystem approach, the development community—both donors and practitioners—needs to embrace partnerships with the private sector to maximize impact and effectiveness of development programs. Embracing partnerships means really understanding the partner, and the role that each partner plays within the ecosystem. While partnering with MNOs is critical to the success of any development

intervention involving mobiles, an understanding of their business models is necessary to create a sustainable partnership with mutually beneficial outcomes. In other words, while you may sometimes be able to get an MNO to provide you free SMS messages, it will be done as CSR and won't be sustainable; for a better chance at sustainability, you'll need to appeal to their business interests. Similarly, partnering with developers is a good way to improve technology for beneficiaries, but requires an understanding and acceptance of the iterative nature of user-centered design.

#3: Using Data Improves Decision-Making—but Don't Forget Ethics

It's 2015, mobile technology is ubiquitous. Now it's time to think about data – what to collect and how to use it – and consider how to do so ethically. Real-time (or near real-time) data has great potential to impact decision making and policy at all levels, but effectively utilizing it can be a challenge. It's critical to think through why we're collecting data, and how to visualize the data to maximize impact and leverage the stories that data can tell. Data and ethics are inevitably intertwined. It is critical for the development community to be open and transparent about data ownership, publicizing data, and protecting confidentiality. Organizations that are dealing with people's data need to think about their responsibility to the individuals whose data they collect, both in the present and future. This means putting people's privacy above all, having guidance in place to ensure responsible data practices, and thinking about the long-term implications of habitualizing people to giving away their data to anyone who asks without offering anything in return.

#4: Improving Access Empowers Actors at the Base of the Pyramid

Despite the expanding usage of mobile technology, there are still significant numbers of people without access to technology, particularly women and ethnic/linguistic minorities. As a development community, we need to better understand how communities access information, what barriers to communication exist, and what content is relevant to communities, in order to better reach underserved populations in development programs. Understanding these issues, and building trust around them, will ultimately enable us to improve access and subsequently deliver relevant content to individuals more appropriately and effectively.

These four takeaways capture the core themes of the event, although given all of the opportunities for networking and side conversations, they are just a peek into what came out of this year's forum.

You can access more information about the forum from the following links below:

- [Presentations](#) from M4D Asia 2015
- USAID's [photos](#) from M4D Asia 2015
- Press releases about the [M4D](#) and [Mobile Financial Services](#) contest winners and finalists
- Download the [Integrating Mobiles into Development Projects handbook](#)

USAID RDMA Director Michael Yates giving opening remarks. Photo Credit: Praiyawee Tontulawat, USAID