SNAPSHOT
Indigenous Communities Use Mobiles to Learn About Land Rights

In Cambodia, indigenous communities can now access land law information using mobiles.

Outline of country with Cambodian flag
Photo source: Creative Commons

The Mobiles for Development Award grant funds enabled Open Institute to develop an innovative, on-demand service for indigenous communities to access land legislation in their own language for the first time, opening the door for indigenous communities to learn about any topic.

Translating written legislation into indigenous languages that do not have an alphabet is clearly problematic and creates a significant barrier for indigenous communities to access information on laws relevant to them and their rights. Open Institute creatively tackled this challenge by developing an interactive voice response (IVR) system that individuals can use to listen to voice recordings in indigenous languages that can be accessed via a menu on a mobile phone (i.e. "to learn about..., press/say 1").

Based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Open Institute won the 2014 Mobiles for Development in Asia Award, sponsored by USAID and FHI 360 through the mSTAR project, for their system. Open Institute's system is connected to all the mobile operators in Cambodia and allows civil society organizations (CSOs) to reach a greater number of beneficiaries with essential legal information.

Using the grant funds provided through the award, Open Institute created a smartphone app that functions as a fully contained IVR system, dubbed Self-IVR, without any need to dial out. It allows the ethnic minority communities to learn about land legislation, registration and land rights. To accomplish this, they first conducted a study to learn which land legislation topics were most relevant to the communities, then worked with lawyers to obtain legally accurate information. Next, they structured the content so that it would be easily navigable using an IVR menu-based system. They included contact information of CSOs able to assist these communities with land rights questions and legal procedures. Finally, they translated and recorded the content in Tampuon—an indigenous language without a written alphabet—for the app.

Although the smartphone penetration rate in Cambodia is quite low, and even lower among indigenous communities, Open Institute found that the Tampuon community engages in collective action (i.e. listening to the radio); they, therefore, only need one smartphone to collectively access the IVR app. Open Institute translated a total of 69 land law articles in Tampuon. The system is being deployed by Building Community Voices and the Cambodian Indigenous Youth Association, and there are plans to introduce it in three more indigenous languages as well as in Khmer.