



Photo: Karen Reidy, WHO



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Mobile Health Connecting Mothers and Midwives in Manufahi

Nervous chatter filled the air of Suco Betano, one blazingly bright Friday morning in March. Men gathered at the back of the hall smoking cigarettes, as many expectant mothers filed into the benches and plastic seats towards the front. The public meeting had been called to launch ‘Liga Inan’ in Manufahi - Timor’s first mobile health project.

Liga Inan means ‘connecting mothers.’ The aim of the project is to improve the health of mothers and children in a way that has never been done before in Timor-Leste. Using the latest digital technology, designed by Catalpa International, midwives can now use mobile phones to track women’s progress during pregnancy and send important health messages tailored to the individual woman’s needs. The most important part of the interaction is that the communication goes both ways. If a woman needs to contact her midwife in case of any concerns about her pregnancy, the woman can send a text or a ‘liga hau’ (call me) message to the midwife. The midwife can then phone her back to make an assessment and give the woman medical advice. So even if a woman has no phone credit, she still has a link to her midwife in the nearest health facility and most importantly to someone who cares.

Timor-Leste has one of the highest fertility rates and maternal mortality rates in South East Asia. 78% of births take place at home and only 30% of births are delivered by a skilled birth attendant, such as a doctor, midwife or nurse. Delfina Perreira, District Program Health Officer for Maternal and Child Health in Manufahi, explains that even though midwives are required to provide ante natal care to all expectant mothers, they often don’t know where many women live and many villages are completely inaccessible by road. Pregnant women often present to the health facility too late and sometimes not at all, so it can be very difficult for midwives to reach the community with timely health care. However, ‘mobile health’ can help overcome these barriers and change the very nature of the relationship between midwives and mothers, especially in remote areas, where access to health services is severely restricted.

At the touch of a button, midwives can register women’s names, addresses and expected delivery dates, after which the women will receive regular updates by text message about ante natal care appointments, skilled birth attendance, exclusive breast feeding, danger signs during pregnancy, and the importance of delivering at the health facility. The Liga Inan socialization meeting in Betano also provided the opportunity for local midwives to give presentations about maternal and child health.



Members of the Liga Inan team register expectant mothers in Suco Betano



Petrolina Perreira pictured with her Liga Inan registration booklet

Petrolina Perreira (21) from Betano said that she is expecting her first baby and that she heard about the danger signs of pregnancy for the very first time at the Liga Inan meeting. She registered for the Liga Inan project and said that she now plans to deliver at the health facility. Florino da Costa (53) said 'As a father I would recommend to my wife or to my daughters to go to the health post or the hospital in Same. I think it (Liga Inan) is important because it can keep mothers healthy and make it easier for the midwife and the community to communicate.'

Liga Inan is a four year program which is funded by USAID and implemented by NGO Health Alliance International (HAI). While it is too early days to assess the impact of the program there are many positive indicators emerging so far. Paul Vasconcelos, Liga Inan Project Coordinator explains that over 141 women registered for Liga Inan during the first two weeks of its launch, much more than anticipated. Another encouraging sign stems from the increase in the number of births now being assisted by midwives in Manufahi. Six months before the program's launch, midwives in Same assisted 34 births on average each month. However, during the two months following the launch, between 55 and 56 births were assisted each month, with 36 of these births taking place in the health facility during both months. When asked about her experience of the Liga Inan program, Fransisca, a mother from Holarua commented "Thank-you very much for messages. I am happy and have been attended to very well by the midwives. When we called the emergency number the midwives responded very well. I am grateful for this program. Thank you."

Ms. Elizabeth Elson, director of HAI, notes that women are not only sending 'liga hau' messages to their midwives, they are also using their own phone credit to thank midwives for updates and reminders and for coming to their villages to speak to them about 'Liga Inan' and maternal health. This kind of response was unprecedented and it is a particularly heart-warming aspect of this program, considering phone credit, at 6 cent per text message, is very expensive for the majority of the Timorese population - 40% of whom live on less than a dollar a day. This response shows how the relationship between midwives and community members is changing. Links, bonds and trust are being forged. There is two way communication, even for those living in extremely remote villages and women now feel connected to their midwife because of their mobile phone.

If successful, Liga Inan has the potential to revolutionize approaches to health care in Timor-Leste, where access to services remains limited. Potentially, mobile health projects could be expanded to cover a wide range of health issues in all 13 districts. The focus for Liga Inan however, is to improve maternal and child health in Manufahi over the next four years. If early indicators continue, Timor's first mobile health program will make an immeasurable difference to hundreds of women and children's lives, overcoming fundamental challenges in the health system, in a country that urgently needs change.



Delfina Perreira, the District Program Health Officer for Maternal and Child Health in Manufahi gives a presentation at the Liga Inan launch



Members of Suco Betano attend Liga Inan launch