Overview of the innovation
The Government of Rwanda (GoR) has hired and assigned School-Based Mentors (SBMs) to support basic education schools throughout the country (each SBM covers two schools). Previously, SBMs had little contact with each other and little access to resources and information beyond their initial training.

FHI 360’s Mentorship Community of Practice (MCOP) project used Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to enable SBMs to connect with each other to provide peer support and share resources via an online ‘Community of Practice’ (COP). The project provided high-interest information about Rwanda’s education system, and made resources available for mentors to use with teachers to improve English-language knowledge and pedagogical practice in Rwandan classrooms.

The purpose of the innovation was for better school-based mentoring to improve the quality of teaching of 25,000 teachers in 1,000 basic education schools across Rwanda.

Major activities included: (i) establishing and organising a library of resources to support mentors; (ii) developing online and mobile channels to distribute these resources and connect mentors with each other; (iii) creating partnerships to subsidize online and mobile access to these channels; and (iv) conducting training and outreach activities for all senior mentors and half of the country’s SBMs.

The project was flexible in its delivery, e.g. it responded to the need for greater resource and support for SBMs in their mentoring of teachers in English language.

Grant Recipient:
The project was implemented by FHI 360 from the US.

Contacts:
Steven Ehrenberg: sehrenberg@fhi360.org
Ildephonse Bikino: ibikino@fhi360.org

What makes it innovative?
Online COPs have been widely used in educational settings globally but were new to the Rwandan context, particularly in the use of mobile and online platforms which showed technological innovation. The learning that had emerged from the experience with a web portal for teachers implemented by FHI in Rwanda previously was used for designing the MCOP intervention.

A large number of mentors were recruited from the region (Uganda, Kenya) and had little contact with each other and little access to resources and information. The COP enhanced access to professional support. Moreover the community has been set up for use as a tool for peer learning and as a channel for communication between mentors, the Rwandan Education Board (REB) and other organizations, which was new to Rwanda.

Relevance to education priorities:
Main Theme: Effective teaching and learning;
Sub-theme: technology
Rwanda’s Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy (EDPRS) identified SBMs as a priority to improve the quality of teaching and learning and strengthen teacher proficiency to teach in English. This project sought to support SBMs to more effectively address this priority.
Project learning (activity/output to outcomes level)

- The MCOP platform is frequently used (many SBMs are online for several hours per day), mainly for the following purposes: (i) sharing of information through use of the forum; (ii) interactions with peers and sharing good practices; (iii) accessing the library of documents.
- MCOP SMS teaching tips are considered very useful.
- Many SBMs felt that the information and exchange through MCOP helped them support teachers to improve their teaching practices, including the use of English in schools.

Possible future improvements include:
- Engaging those SBMs to the MCOP platform that did not participate.
- Further enriching the resources available for SBMs by adding elements that reinforce the use of the MCOP portal and lead people to the portal.
- Making better use of the MCOP as part of the existing bi-monthly continuous professional development sessions for SBMs.
- Repackaging the existing content and making the content also available offline.

Project outcomes and reflection on monitoring and evaluation

This is a combination of evaluation designs with (i) a quasi-experimental design (control & treatment groups studied at baseline and end-line) using quantitative surveys and tests for change in knowledge and attitude of SBMs; descriptive studies including (ii) a quantitative analysis of the use of the online COP by SBMS and (iii) a qualitative analysis of their discussion forums to determine the extent and the nature of the online community. This was accompanied by (iv) a number of qualitative case studies of schools examining the role of SBMs, and the views of head teachers and teachers on their work.

Results show that the COP was used by the majority of SBMs with nearly 70% active during the final quarter of the project. The results were inconclusive for the impact on SBMs and teachers in terms of changes in knowledge and views of pedagogy, and SBMs work with teachers (except on individual teachers’ English language skills), compared to the control group. There were improved levels of interactions of SBMs with each other (peer learning).

The relative lack of results may have more to do with the fact that the national SBM programme changed focus to English language support, whereas MCOP focused more on pedagogy. The study was rigorously designed and executed but suffered from this change of focus of the national SBM programme.
Conditions for success
The success of this project is dependent upon the existing capacity of SBMs to engage in a COP and/or their desire to develop the ICT skills to do this. It was a project that witnessed significant engagement from this key stakeholder group with SBMs reporting that the COP was time-saving and provided an effective alternative to travelling.

The long-term success of the project depends on the continued role of Senior SBMs and SBMs in the education system and/or how the system will be extended to other professional groups in the Rwandan education system.

Scale up and sustainability considerations
The MCOP is a highly specific intervention targeting a single group of education stakeholders. Currently 500 Mentors (half of the SBMs) are being reached through the online 'Community of Practice'. Reaching all 1000+ mentors through the platform can be accomplished as the technology platform has been established and is functioning well. The project engages closely with REB, in particular the Teacher Development and Management (TDM) Department. They use the new platform for official communications with SBMs and expressed great appreciation and enthusiasm for sustaining it.

Moreover, introducing new COPs for other practitioner groups (such as DEOs and Head Teachers) is potentially viable as REB-ICT is currently in the process of establishing a general Education Portal. REB-ICT is looking to FHI/MCOP for designing, establishing and further expanding this portal.

A notable success of the project is the decision by USAID to provide FHI 360 with scale up funding to grow and sustain the current intervention. The scale up of MCOP has the objective of reaching out to all mentors with additional resources as well as ensuring a wider spread extending the portal to DEOs and Head Teachers, providing them with additional content. In addition, and very importantly, the allocated budget envelope will also build the required capacity of REB-TDM and REB-ICT to sustain the platform in the long run.

The main risk to the programme is of the government not continuing to support the national mentorship programme and this situation should be closely monitored. However, MCOP is sufficiently close to REB and any possible government decisions related to teacher professional development and the position of mentors can be addressed in a timely manner by adjusting the COP programme to address new developments. Under the USAID scale-up, FHI is reframing MCOP to be an in-service teacher training channel. So, if the SBM program is discontinued, MCOP can function as for whichever in-service training group is selected by REB.
Cost Considerations

Reaching all the SBMs through the platform will be cost-efficient as the technology platform has been established already and is functioning well. Further investment will be needed to provide SBMs with equipment (netbook), a portable modem and skills training with the only recurrent cost being the airtime for the modem.

Pilot phase costs reaching 500 SBMs amounted to GBP 660 per mentor per year. FHI’s scale up plan indicates that the costs of reaching all mentors in the country would reduce to GBP 250 per mentor per year. Since each SBM supports approximately 60 teachers, this means the cost of the improved mentoring would reduce from GBP 11 to GBP 4.17 per teacher per year.

To also establish similar COPs for other practitioner groups, such as DEO’s, head teachers, and teachers will be far more demanding and would involve, in addition to recurrent and equipment cost, additional technical expertise development of new content and training.

The project also recognises that, in addition to reaching all mentors, further capacity strengthening of REB is required to institutionalise and sustain the intervention. Although this may not require a large amount of financial investment it will require intensive advocacy and support work with the Ministry, in particular REB-TDM and REB-ICT.

Immediate Next Steps

- Discuss the scale-up plan and annual work plan with REB and start scale-up implementation through USAID funding
- From the beginning of the scale-up intervention, establish the mechanism to be able to assess the impact of the USAID supported scale up model in supporting all mentors and the impact the COP generates for new practitioners, viz. DEO’s and head teachers.
- Continue the dialogue about the continuation of the national mentorship programme and use this dialogue to effectively link the COP intervention with future teacher professional development initiatives.
- Monitor the use of the (expanded) education portal managed by REB.