

GIRLS IN CHARGE



HOW THE **OKY**
PERIOD TRACKER
APP EMPOWERS GIRLS
AND HELPS TO CLOSE
THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

INSIGHTS FROM
SUCCESS STORIES
IN TANZANIA, KENYA
AND NEPAL



#LetsTalk
PERIOD





The Oky app gives girls of all abilities the information they need to manage their periods and answers their questions about sexual and reproductive health. As an inclusive digital solution created 'by girls, for girls,' it offers an entry point to practice and improve digital skills.



"Menstruation, teenage pregnancy, child marriage: these are issues that parents and teachers are not really able to talk about – and young people have real questions!" Mariam Mhina works with Tai, a youth-led NGO based in Dar es Salaam which uses storytelling and technology to empower young people. Since 2021 Tai has been the Tanzanian partner for Oky, a digital period tracker which doubles as a pocket-sized encyclopedia on menstruation and sexual and reproductive health for girls.

"Usually when we talk about technology and digital tools, we're talking about global solutions that may not fit the Tanzanian girl," Mariam Mhina continues. "Because Oky is co-created by the people who are going to use it, it reflects the needs and realities of girls living here." In each country where Oky is introduced, girls design the avatars and app backgrounds. They give feedback on features and usability. They also decide what topics the app should cover and make sure that the content is presented in adolescent-friendly language. This makes Oky a very special product – not just for breaking taboos around menstruation, but also for building digital skills and closing the digital divide in a country where many girls have never engaged with a smartphone or a tablet before.

THE OKY STORY, IN BRIEF

"All around the world, adolescents' number one question is about the changes happening in their bodies," says Gerda Binder, Senior Advisor on Gender and Technology at UNICEF, which initiated Oky back in 2018. "We wondered: 'What would it look like to build something with girls that gives them answers to their questions in an engaging, evidence-based and girl-friendly way?'"

Oky's aim is to help girls of all abilities overcome gender barriers which hold them back and to enable them to confidently navigate adolescence. The app was first designed with groups of girls in Indonesia and Mongolia; it has since been extended to 10 more countries through a 'social franchising' model. In each country, a local partner organisation – like Tai, in Tanzania – works with groups of girls, including girls with disabilities, to 'localise' the global version of Oky and to promote it in schools, health facilities, through the media and via community organisations.

Oky's user-centred design process is very different from the standard approach to app development which assumes a default male or adult user. It is also tailored to the digital realities of girls living in low- and middle-income countries. Because many girls have limited connectivity and work with older technology, the app is lightweight, it functions offline, and can be used on basic handsets.

Oky is recognised as a Digital Public Good by the Digital Public Goods Alliance. In 2024 Oky was honoured with a SDG Digital GameChangers Award for organisations leveraging digital technologies to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

AN EVOLVING PARTNERSHIP BASED ON SHARED VALUES

Oky is supported by a range of partners, including the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) which for many years has backed efforts to improve menstrual health and hygiene and adolescent health both globally and in partner countries. The earliest collaboration between German development cooperation and Oky dates back to 2020, in Indonesia. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), working on behalf of BMZ, promoted Oky through the Regional Fit for School Programme and helped to ensure that Oky was integrated into Indonesia's official school health platform.

In Nepal, GIZ facilitated the integration of Oky into the #LetsTalkPERIOD campaign featuring well-known media stars Keki Adhikari and Dayahang Rai – the first example of an Oky promotional campaign using local influencers as goodwill ambassadors. "Collaborations come in many different shapes and this was a great example of an in-kind partnership based on shared values," says Jan Schlenk, of the Water and Sanitation Policy – Innovations for Resilience programme which is behind the #LetsTalkPERIOD campaign.

A GIRL-CENTERED PLATFORM HELPS TO BUILD DIGITAL SKILLS

The partnership moved to a new level in 2023, when the BMZ-financed regional programme GenerationDigital! supported Tai and LVCT Health, the Oky partner in Kenya, to use Oky as an entry point for building girls' digital skills.

Particularly in low- and middle-income countries there is a significant gender divide when it comes to digital literacy. Girls and young women have more limited access to devices and connectivity compared to boys and young men. There is also a shortage of platforms for learning about the digital world which meet girls 'where they are'. This makes a girl-centered open-source app like Oky a powerful resource.

"While engaging with the Oky app, girls also develop the skills needed to become responsible actors in a digital society," explains Christian Gmelin, an advisor with the GenerationDigital! programme. "As they learn how to use the digital tools included in the app, these become an integral part of their lives and enlarge their digital capabilities."

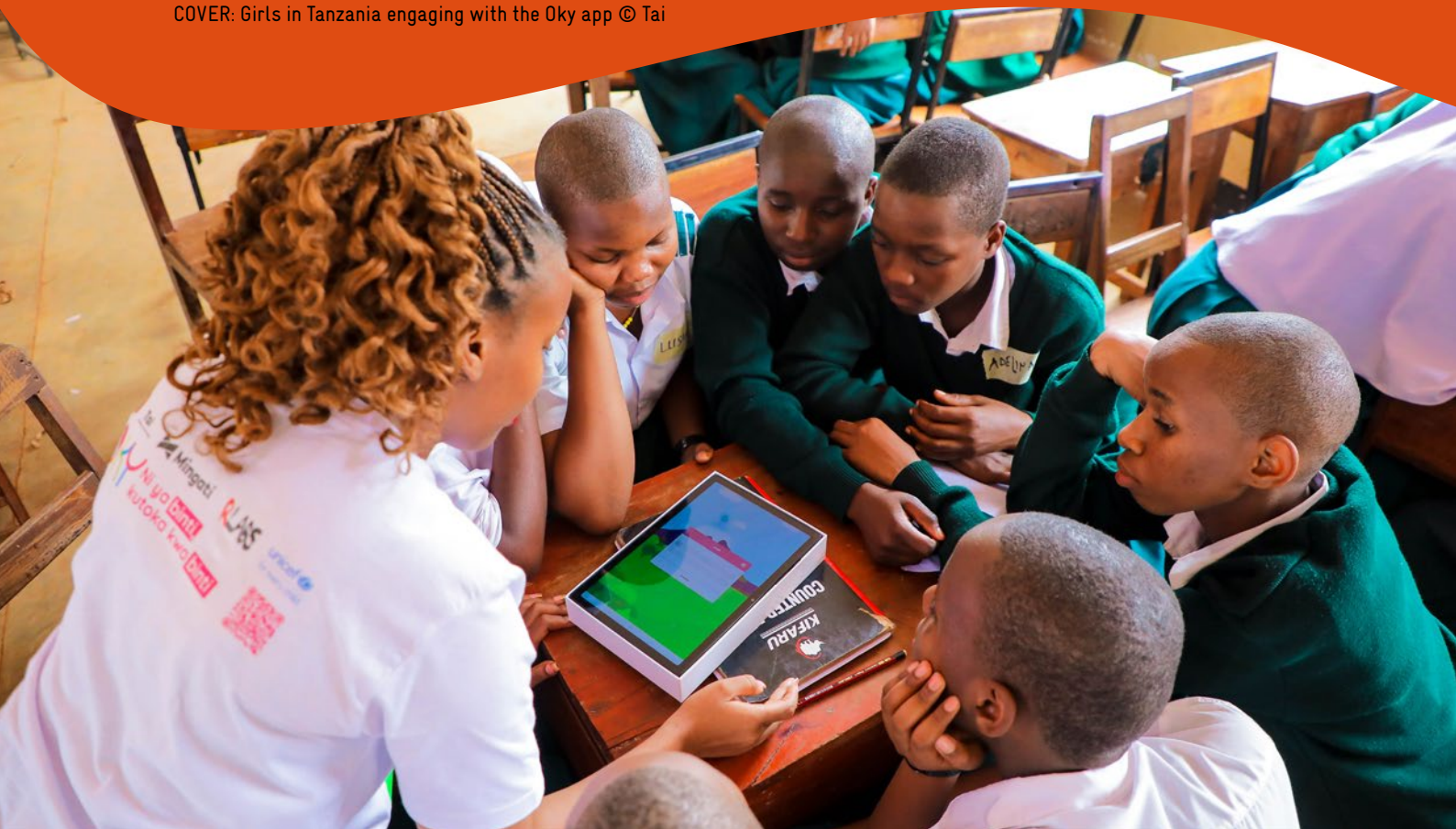
With support from GenerationDigital!, LVCT Health and Tai engaged hundreds of girls in Kenya and Tanzania, respectively, in 'co-creation' sessions. They had the opportunity to review the Oky app, critically assess its features and content, and make suggestions for how it could be improved.

More than 2,200 girls in Tanzania took part in digital skills workshops where they learned about the Internet, search engines, online safety and privacy. According to Mariam Mhina, of Tai, many of them had little if any experience with digital tools prior to encountering Oky: "A lot of the girls had never held a tablet before. To have Oky as a digital solution specifically designed for girls is a really big deal." Desktop and SMS versions of Oky were developed in Tanzania to enable girls without smartphones to access the app via school computers or basic phones.

In Kenya, LVCT Health organised training sessions that introduced more than 8,300 girls to digital skills, including basic digital design principles. Seventy girls with programming knowledge had the opportunity to participate in girls-only coding camps and hackathons, where they generated ideas for new features for the Oky app, developed these and then presented them. Juliet Owino, the tech lead with LVCT Health, was struck by the positive energy these events unleashed: "The girls really loved the hackathon experience and left eager for chances to continue building their skills through training or mentorship programmes."



TOP: Girls in Nepal explore Oky – hosted by NFCC Nepal © GIZ
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 MIDDLE: Film poster #LetsTalkPERIOD x #OkyaNepal © GIZ
 MIDDLE RIGHT: At the girls-only Oky hackathon in Kenya © LVCT Health
 BOTTOM: Learning digital skills with Oky in Tanzania © Tai
 COVER: Girls in Tanzania engaging with the Oky app © Tai





Avatars of girls
with disabilities
© Oky

DIGITAL LITERACY FOR ADOLESCENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Girls and young women with disabilities face particular challenges in terms of digital inclusion, as well as access to relevant information. They are less likely than girls without disabilities to use mobile phones or smartphones. In addition, they are often not aware of existing phone accessibility features that can help them to navigate digital content.

The digital skills training workshops organised by Tai and LVCT Health addressed this 'double digital divide' of gender and disability through a practical module focused specifically on accessibility. Children with disabilities explored how to access and work with pre-installed accessibility settings on their smartphones, such as colour contrast, screen zoom and the 'read to me' feature. They learned which features are relevant in relation to visual, hearing and dexterity impairments, and had the chance to practice activating and using these features to enhance the experience of navigating Oky.

These digital literacy trainings are just one of the latest examples of how Oky strives to be inclusive and accessible. Oky works closely with persons with disabilities as part of the 'localisation' process in each country. Girls with disabilities are part of the groups of girls creating avatars which reflect a wide range of bodies and abilities. Specific content is included for girls with disabilities and their caregivers, providing guidance about, for example, how girls with visual impairments or girls who use wheelchairs can manage their periods. The app itself has been designed to be compliant with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) standards.

"Oky is an outstanding example of how digital projects can embrace inclusion by actively involving persons with disabilities as users and stakeholders from the very start," says Sandra Rotzinger, an advisor with the GIZ-implemented Global Programme on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities. "At the upcoming Global Disability Summit (GDS) 2025, Germany – together with co-hosts Jordan and the International Disability Alliance – will bring together global, national, and local stakeholders to push for greater disability inclusion. As a result, we hope that more global goods, like the Oky app, are truly inclusive and accessible to all."

OKY AND GIZ CONTINUE TO PUSH BOUNDARIES

The Oky team continues to innovate – and in GIZ has found a partner that is equally keen to explore new use cases for social impact. UNICEF has once again joined forces with the GIZ-implemented programmes on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, Water and Sanitation Policy, and Generation Digital!, as well as FAIR Forward, to explore the use of Oky as a test case for creating EasyRead formats using open-source generative AI.

EasyRead formats make content accessible for persons with intellectual disabilities, including those with Down syndrome, as well as individuals with dyslexia, non-native speakers, and anyone who may find reading difficult. Because they are expensive and time consuming to produce, keeping all of Oky's 23 language versions up to date in EasyRead formats is presently an insurmountable task. However, the emergence of generative AI raises the possibility that content could be transformed into EasyRead formats with the click of a button.

UNICEF and its GIZ partners are currently in the accelerator phase of the GIZ Innovation Fund – a corporate intrapreneurship programme – to develop a product that would allow Oky content in Kiswahili to be converted into EasyRead. If successful, this would be pathbreaking for a non-Western language. "This is a use case for AI that could change the game for disability inclusion, particularly for anyone with a reading or literacy challenge," explains UNICEF's Gerda Binder.

As the links between Oky and German development cooperation have grown over the years, they have also become more intentional, moving into the realm of digital skills and disability inclusion. "Digital programming is dynamic. One has to be agile," says Gerda Binder. "Oky is not a standalone app, it's an ecosystem approach. It's a constant process for us and our partners to engage with users to answer the question: 'What else can be done?'"

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Friedrich Ebert Allee 32, 53113 Bonn, Germany
www.giz.de

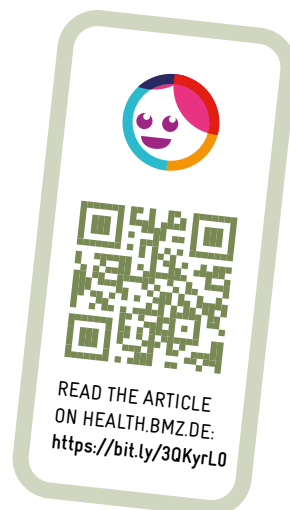
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Author: Karen Birdsall

Layout: büro lüdke

For more Information please contact:
menstruaction@giz.de

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