

# Partnering with the Private Sector for Mobile Messaging:

Lessons Learned from Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria



This learning brief is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of Breakthrough ACTION and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

Photo Credit: Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria

# Acknowledgements

Breakthrough ACTION, which is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and based at Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs, would like to acknowledge and express gratitude to all the staff who participated in developing content for the platform Bauchi, Ebonyi, Federal Capital Territory, Kebbi, and Sokoto for their collaboration during the project implementation.

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# Background

This learning brief describes how Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria partnered with the telecommunications company Airtel Nigeria to increase access to health information and social and behavior change (SBC) messages. Messages have been delivered through a service called 4-2-1, a digital platform established by the project's consortium partner, Viamo. The 4-2-1 platform is a toll-free service to Airtel subscribers that enables them to access recorded content anytime using an interactive voice response menu from any type of phone in the five main languages spoken in Nigeria: English, Pidgin, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo.

Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria is the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) flagship SBC project in Nigeria, starting in 2018 and running to 2025 under the prime implementation of the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs. Its goal has been to increase the practice of priority health behaviors in the areas of malaria; maternal, newborn, and child health and nutrition; family planning and reproductive health; tuberculosis; COVID-19; and Global Health Security priority zoonotic diseases at the national and subnational levels in collaboration with Federal and State Ministries of Health and relevant USAID implementing partners.

To encourage the adoption of 17 priority health behaviors endorsed by Nigerian and global health experts, the project engaged communities, households, and individuals through multiple channels, including community engagement, radio, and television. Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria also took advantage of the Airtel 4-2-1 mobile phone platform to expand reach and reinforce community-based and media messages.

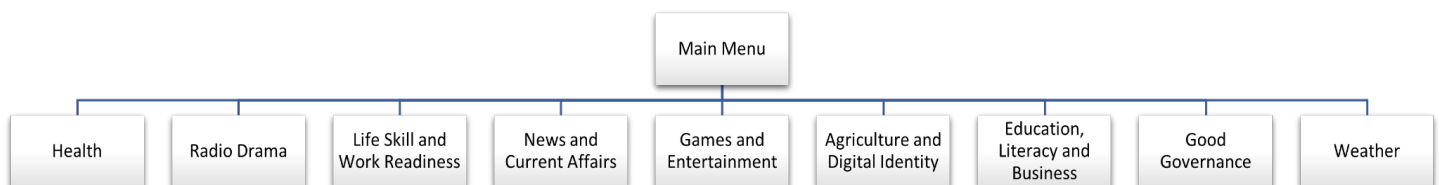
# Description of the **4-2-1 service**

The 4-2-1 service was established by Viamo in collaboration with Airtel Nigeria to deliver toll-free on-demand content to Airtel subscribers. The 4-2-1 platform offers a wide range of content developed by partners, including health, employability, financial literacy, news, games, entertainment, agriculture, education, literacy, good governance, and weather updates. By dialing 4-2-1 and following the message prompts, callers can access information in any of Nigeria's five major languages, anytime and from any location in the country.

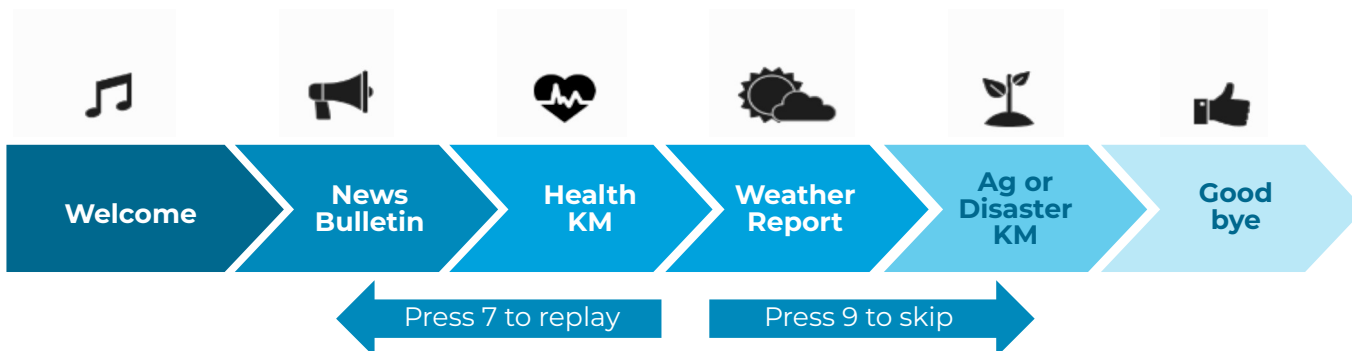
## Two features help users find content:

the Main Menu and Daily Digest.

The Main Menu offers a range of choices with submenus under each. This setup helps users find the specific content they are interested in.



Users can also access content through the Daily Digest, which prioritizes content during outbreaks or when new content becomes available on 4-2-1. The Daily Digest streamlines the navigation process, providing swift access to content without unnecessary searching.



### **Application of the Principles of Digital Development**

Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria aligned its 4-2-1 services with the principles of digital development, enhancing user-centricity, scalability, and sustainability. Building on an existing digital platform, the project addressed users' information needs, employed simple navigation for callers with limited digital literacy, and prioritized financial and technical sustainability in partnership with Airtel Nigeria. The company continued to provide free health information beyond the life of the project.

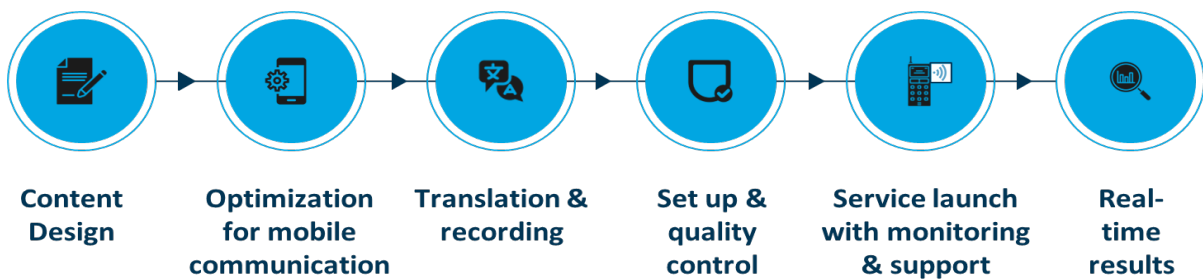
### **Breakthrough Action-Nigeria Partnership with 4-2-1 for SBC Communication**

Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria partnered with Airtel to offer health-related content toll-free through the 4-2-1 service. This public-private partnership was a win-win for all parties. For Airtel, the 4-2-1 service built customer loyalty, increased revenue, and attracted new subscribers. The free service also allowed individuals with limited financial means to access health content. For Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria, the partnership provided access to Airtel's 61.8 million subscribers across Nigeria without charge.



Dr. Segun Ogunsanya, former Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director of Airtel Nigeria, had this to say: "We are pleased to see how the 4-2-1 initiative is helping to transform lives in many remote communities across the country by turning simple mobile phones into search engines that are both locally and globally relevant and in the mother tongue of the target audience."

Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria, along with partners and government agencies, developed the health content. Viamo set up the 4-2-1 platform and optimized the content for mobile use, and the project's media unit translated, pretested, and recorded it. Once the content was ready, Viamo uploaded and launched the platform for Airtel subscribers to access. Airtel sent text messages inviting all subscribers and has provided them with up to 10 free 4-2-1 calls per month.



Viamo monitored the platform for technical issues and utilization data through a real-time dashboard. When technical issues arose, Viamo support teams resolved them.



Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria's content on the 4-2-1 platform has included radio dramas, games, and radio spots. Albishirin ku! (Hausa for "Good Tidings") was a radio drama set in the fictional town of Bakeso in northern Nigeria and infused with health messaging. Listeners could access 13 episodes in each season for seven seasons through 4-2-1.

Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria also developed educational "choose your adventure" digital games called Kacici Kacici (KK) and Adventures of Wazobia (AoW) for the 4-2-1 service. The games let participants choose their path, determine the story's outcome, and become a "game hero", using interactive voice response on their mobile phones. 4-2-1 released KK in five stages between 2020 and 2024, and AoW in one stage in 2023 and 2024.

**The project also shared radio spots about family planning, malaria, COVID-19, Lassa fever, and mpox through 4-2-1.** Callers were more likely to access these short recordings when they were prioritized on the Daily Digest. The service became a place where people found messages they were not necessarily looking for but benefited from, especially during outbreaks.

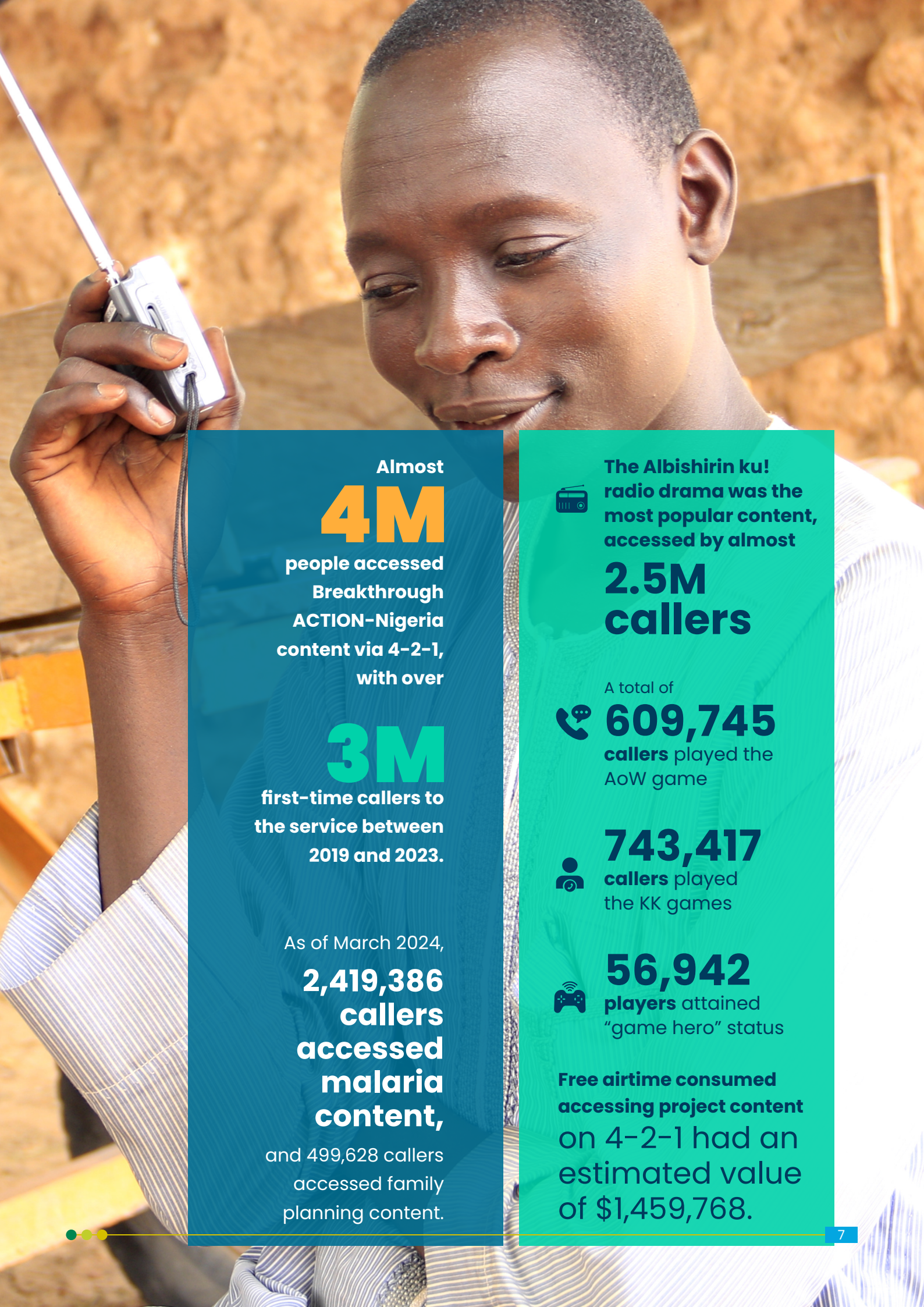


## Results and Cost Share



At a community meeting in Bauchi State, a mother shared how she used her mobile phone to access vital health information for herself and her family through 4-2-1. She said, “My phone and my radio help me to continue to listen to Albishirin Ku!, and we even discuss the health messages in our women’s group. I practiced the behaviors, including attending ANC [antenatal care] and [exclusively] breastfeeding my newborn, and I am happy with the results so far.”





Almost  
**4M**  
people accessed  
Breakthrough  
ACTION-Nigeria  
content via 4-2-1,  
with over

**3M**  
first-time callers to  
the service between  
2019 and 2023.

As of March 2024,  
**2,419,386**  
callers  
accessed  
**malaria**  
content,  
and 499,628 callers  
accessed family  
planning content.



The Albishirin ku!  
radio drama was the  
most popular content,  
accessed by almost

**2.5M**  
callers

A total of



**609,745**  
callers played the  
AoW game



**743,417**  
callers played  
the KK games



**56,942**  
players attained  
“game hero” status

Free airtime consumed  
accessing project content  
on 4-2-1 had an  
estimated value  
of \$1,459,768.

# Lessons Learned



Several lessons emerged from the project's 4-2-1 experience.



## **Use interactive, short formats to share content through mobile technology.**

Storytelling and games captivate callers while sharing health information. Ensure users can easily navigate to the content they are interested in, and be mindful of content overload. The shorter the content (five minutes maximum), the better because users do not spend a lot of time listening.



## **Place users at the center.**

Pretest content and the platform with intended users to ensure a seamless experience and relevance. Deliver content in languages that make navigation easy and content digestible. Solicit frequent feedback from users, address challenges, and keep content up to date.



## **Involve all mobile operators at the outset to extend reach.**

The reach of 4-2-1 was limited mainly to Airtel customers. Although users on other networks could access 4-2-1 through a long number, very few people did owing to the charges involved.



## **Have a content promotion strategy in place to drive users to the platform.**

The project promoted 4-2-1 through radio, social media, community engagement, posters, and short message service messages.



## **Consider gender disparities when developing digital interventions.**

More men (65%) than women accessed 4-2-1 content, and 26% of respondents accessed 4-2-1 through shared phones. Many women likely shared phones, as women are less likely to own them. In situations in which mobile devices were shared, the user experience for shared phone users should be considered and can be enhanced by creating features that accommodate multiple users on the same device while maintaining privacy and security.





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