DIGITAL HEALTH

What You Should Know

Digital innovations are key to health emergency responses. Mature health information systems support better patient care and enable resilient health emergency responses. Digital technology proved critical for contact tracing, vaccine education, and vaccine tracking during COVID-19. Countries already adept at using digital technologies pivoted essential health services virtually and tracked population health needs for improved response.[1]

U.S. global digital health leadership is critical to health system strengthening. By coordinating investments, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other funders played a vital role in strengthening national digital health strategies, technology competencies, and validation of software platforms.[2,3] This forward-thinking approach enabled countries to procure and quickly adapt existing software[4] for the pandemic response, which saved lives.[5] Conversely, many countries with little prior investment struggled to manage during the pandemic[6] and required substantial support to modernize their health information systems.

Digital technology is transforming healthcare. The U.S. must continue to be a reliable partner to sustain the gains from COVID-19 digital innovations to support the maturity of country health information systems, including interoperability. This will allow countries to be resilient in managing public health emergencies and self-reliant in strengthening health information priorities.

Congressional Calls to Action

Increase funding for digital health priorities.
USAID and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) require increased funding to improve digital health capacity in low- and middle-income countries. Underfunded areas include: national readiness for information communication technology; digital health competency training for leaders, managers, and health workforces; and development of funded national digital health strategies and architecture.[7]

Support global digital health policies and investments that align with national health strategies.
The Ethiopia Digital Health Activity, stewarded by the local USAID mission, is a great example of a scale-up model that works and enables countries to independently manage their health information systems.[8] Congress should follow this example to ensure future investments align with national digital health strategies and encourage local stewardship to facilitate long-term ownership.

Encourage U.S. agencies to design new digital health procurement mechanisms that enable public and private partnerships.
Countries are being left behind in the data revolution in areas like interoperability, data science, and data protection and security. Congress must encourage USAID and PEPFAR to design agile procurement mechanisms that attract public and private partnerships that can provide cutting-edge technology products and services that countries cannot otherwise access today to address these gaps.

Why is this investment important?

Growing evidence shows that strategic use of digital solutions improves health outcomes and saves lives. Digital health is a strategic lever to address the health inequities and disparities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and rapidly regain global health progress as we approach the 2030 targets deadline.

To generate the highest return for U.S. taxpayers, digital health programs must be anchored in national health sector plans. This promises a much greater likelihood of institutionalization and local ownership. Softwares that can serve multiple uses across program areas should be prioritized since they have a broad health system strengthening impact and maximize the full potential that technology offers.

Digitally-skilled leaders and health workforces are needed to successfully implement technologies to transform their health systems. Global health agencies need to create inclusive ecosystems that attract new and diverse partners who bring unique technical expertise and technologies to tackle the world's most pressing health challenges.

U.S. leadership in modeling new ways of supporting digital and data innovations in global health programs can have multiplier effects by attracting co-investments from other global health partners to secure the financing needed to create resilient, sustainable, digitally transformed health systems.

Digital health is a strategic lever to address the health inequities and disparities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and rapidly regain global health progress as we approach the 2030 targets deadline.

Global Health Council
The Collective Voice of the Global Health Community

Resources

A Vision for Action in Digital Health 2020-2024 (USAID): https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/USAID-A-Digital-Health-Vision-for-Action-v10.28_FINAL_508.pdf

Digital Health Global Goods (Digital Square). https://digitalsquare.org/digital-health-global-goods

2021 The State of Broadband (Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development). https://broadbandcommission.org/publication/state-of-broadband-2021/rt

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Citations

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3. Digital Investment Principles. "Donor Alignment Principles in Digital Health." https://digitalinvestmentprinciples.org

4. Digital Square. "Digital Health Global Goods. https://digitalsquare.org/digital-health-global-goods

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6. A. Bouri, A. Mualiar, H. Schiff R. Bass, H. Dithrich. "Roadmap for the Future of Impact Investing: Reshaping Financial Markets." Global Impact Investing Network. March 20, 2018. https://thegiin.org/research/publication/giin-roadmap/?gclid=Cj0KCQiA2ZCOBhDiARIsAMRfv9LZhR0tBVRsQ6PMa4u0PUiPRrK56jqEojg0Q47fnX7WfnWiKNQU7LoaAnn6EALw_wcB

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8. JSI. Ethiopia Digital Health Activity (USAID). https://www.jsi.com/project/digital-health-activity/