

Health data and digital health

Digital transformation in health systems

Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages: This is the ambitious Sustainable Development Goal for the health sector (SDG 3) that the global community has committed to in its 2030 Agenda. However, getting there will take time. If the current trend continues, around one third of the global population will still be without access to essential health services in 2030.

Digitalisation can help buck this trend by making health services better, more efficient and more transparent and by ensuring that more people can use them. This can only succeed, however, if entire health systems undergo a cross-cutting digital transformation that is both comprehensive and based on human rights.

Challenges for health systems

Until now, health systems in low and middle-income countries have faced the task of ensuring an adequate supply of high-quality, basic services, drugs and vaccines. In addition to this, they are now facing a number of new challenges: People are living longer and often tend to develop more chronic conditions. This leaves a growing number of people in need of life-long medical care.

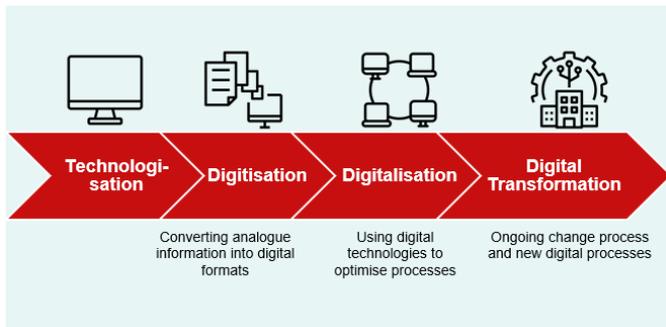
Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how fragile our health systems can be when suddenly and unexpectedly called upon to respond to a major outbreak of infectious disease. Health systems have to prepare for the future because virus-related pandemics can strike again at any time, and pathogens can spread faster in our globalised world.

Digital transformation – the key to the future

Digital transformation offers great potential for strengthening health systems on a long-term basis. Digital technologies offer resource-poor health systems a new way forward, for instance with respect to digital and efficient hospital management, enabling the real-time monitoring of epidemics as they unfold and the delivery of medical consultations and staff training. The Surveillance Outbreak, Response Management and Analysis System (SORMAS), for example, is a software used for monitoring and managing the outbreak of pandemics. SORMAS can network actors in the health sector and enables swift action in response to the outbreak of epidemics. The software is free, does not require a licence and is readily adaptable to a range of different usage scenarios. Nigeria and Germany are just two of the many countries around the globe that use SORMAS.

What does 'digital transformation' mean?

Digital solutions and data-driven health services are growing in importance. Digital technologies are enabling the creation of new health service models with no analogue precedent. 'Digital transformation' describes the ongoing and cross-sectoral process of structural change that digitalisation has triggered in society and the economy. Digital transformation also brings with it a new set of challenges: For example, new laws are needed to regulate personal data analytics, while access to a mobile device or a reliable internet connection is becoming a social determinant of health. Furthermore, patients, health sector workers and decision-makers all need to improve their digital competence.



Digital health and the Sector Initiative Global Health – what we do

The Sector Initiative Global Health shapes digital health at the policy level. With its position paper ‘Global Health - An Investment in the Future,’ Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has produced a corresponding roadmap for German development cooperation.

The sector initiative is tasked with the following:

- Advising BMZ on the topics of data and digital health. This involves observing trends and global debates and using its expertise to help produce political framework documents.
- Serving as a source of knowledge, commissioning studies and compiling background papers.
- Contributing to international initiatives and processes, coordinating networks and representing the approaches used in German development cooperation.
- Supporting partner organisations in piloting new approaches and methods in digital health.

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Our approaches

Digital transformation calls for leadership and coordination. For this reason, the initiative is committed to supporting strategy development, political leadership and national coordinating structures. Projects in the field of digital health must always be people centric. Their focus should be on increasing the acceptance, involvement and skills of all stakeholders, from patients to health sector workers and decision-makers.

Examples of the sector initiative’s work:

- The World Health Organisation is a key player in capacity building and skills development in the digital health sector. Its tasks include formulating standards for learning targets for public officials. The sector initiative provides financial support and contributes its expertise to various working groups.
- Digital Pandemic Preparedness Assessment (DPPA) is a tool for evaluating a country’s digital ecosystem and thus preparedness for a possible pandemic response. DPPA is also used to formulate recommendations for modernisation. Having developed the DPPA tool with its partners, the sector initiative is now piloting it in five selected partner countries.
- The Health Data Collaborative, with its WHO-based secretariat, aims to strengthen health information systems in collaborating countries and to harmonise and coordinate activities in the field of health data governance, protection and harmonisation. The sector initiative provides financial support and is involved in various committees and working groups.

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