



# Launch of the UNDP Digital Health for Development Hub

26 July 2023

## Summary Report

On **26 July 2023**, UNDP launched its **Digital Health for Development Hub** – a one-stop shop with technical, advisory, and partnership support for scaling up digital health solutions.

UNDP works with countries, communities, and partners to scale up **evidence- and rights-based** digital health solutions for resilient and sustainable health systems, and better health and well-being for all. The Digital Health for Development Hub aims to assist countries to identify, adapt and scale-up appropriate digital solutions that strengthen health systems, while supporting **effective and inclusive governance** for digital health and addressing the inequalities that fuel disease and pandemics. The Hub exemplifies UNDP’s strategic focus on transformative drivers for sustainable development.

The full Recording is available [here](#).

### Opening Remarks

#### Mandeep Dhaliwal, Director, HIV and Health Group, UNDP

Mandeep Dhaliwal delivered a compelling introduction marking the launch of UNDP's Digital Health for Development Hub. Mandeep set the precedent for the rest of the launch event, beginning by giving out a **frank assessment** on the state of the SDGs, echoing the Secretary General's latest report on the SDGs being “moderately to severely off track”. It was on this note, Mandeep also communicated the Secretary General’s prospective hopes for the future of health, particularly in **utilizing new and existing digital technologies** to advance the cause of universal health coverage and carrying on the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic, that **data and digital tools are critical for pandemic prevention preparedness and bolstering sustainable health systems** by highlighting underlying vulnerabilities in our health systems.

Mandeep also recognized the **legitimate concerns surrounding digital technologies** perpetuating gender inequalities, stigma and discrimination and human rights violations against marginalized communities. However, she reiterated that this should only serve as a reminder that digitalization – fast-tracked by the COVID-19 pandemic – **must be guided and harnessed** for the purposes of achieving our health-related SDGs and ending inequalities in health.

Mandeep returned to citing the Secretary General’s latest report on the SDGs, bringing renewed attention to ensuring that the **ongoing digital transformation is a universally beneficial** endeavor, squarely aligned with future development objectives. This progressive perspective finds a robust foundation in UNDP's Strategic Plan, serving as a comprehensive framework designed to guide countries back towards

achieving the SDGs. Central to this strategy is a dedicated focus **on accelerating and expanding development outcomes**, particularly in the realm of health and overall well-being.

To build upon this point, Mandeep reiterated UNDP's Digital Health for Development Hub integral role as a nexus for the convergence of UNDP's initiatives and collaborative partnerships in digital health. UNDP's engagement with digital health solutions extends to 150 countries, with substantial involvement in 70 of them, underscoring Mandeep's emphasis on the commitment of both UNDP and its partners to advancing development and making sure no one is left behind. This effort extends to digitizing **routine immunization programmes** and **crucial vaccination campaigns**, to deploying digital tools for the **enhancement of community health systems**, streamlining **health procurement**, improving **supply chain efficiency**, and working towards robust **health information management**.

Crucially, as mentioned by Mandeep, the Hub also **facilitates the provision of essential health services**, spanning HIV, TB, malaria, and maternal and child health. Grounded in the UNDP's Governance and Capacity Development mandates, this collective initiative extends its **influence to fostering inclusive policies and systems**, whilst also upholding evidence-based and rights-centered governance frameworks, ensuring the **ethical and equitable utilization of digital technologies**.

#### [Francine Pickup, Deputy Assistant Administrator and Deputy Director at UNDP](#)

In Francine's introductory address, she underscored the significance of the digital transformation and the launch of UNDP's Digital Health for Development Hub, by emphasizing the **potential of digital technology to drive sustainable development** in healthcare, and in this convergence of digital technology and healthcare is where the **critical juncture lies in achieving universal health coverage and pandemic preparedness**. Francine also made important acknowledgments that access to these innovations are not equal, with **2.9 billion people** who still **lack access to internet connection** highlighting serious **digital divides**, threatening to exacerbate **existing inequalities**.

In an important address, the UN Secretary-General proposed a global digital compact for multi-lateral digital cooperation, aiming for an open, free, secure, and human-centered digital future. UNDP took inspiration from this with the Hub's approach and vision, which is grounded by **principles in science, evidence, equity, and access**. The newly launched Hub embodies the concept of **future smart development**, addressing emerging challenges and fostering partnerships to tackle them in an **agile manner** and to continue **making sense of development complexities**.

The Hub's four main functions are **1) policy and advisory support, 2) capacity development, 3) knowledge management, 4) and South-South exchange and cooperation**, which will benefit from various partners including WHO, UNAIDS, the Global Fund, Gavi, UNICEF, and Digital Square.

In line with these **four functions**, Francine **shared personal examples** of the **impact of digital solutions on health outcomes** in different countries. In **Serbia**, digital systems were developed with a focus on inclusivity, reaching people with disabilities and various age groups. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital platforms were utilized to **facilitate vaccine programmes** in **Serbia, India, and Indonesia**. In **India**, UNDP supported the government in **creating a COVID-19 intelligence network (eVin)** for vaccine rollout, and in doing so, UNDP also supported the **knowledge and technology transfer** to **Indonesia**, where a digital system for vaccine logistics management (SMILE) was successfully scaled up.

## **Introduction**

### **Manish Panish, Policy Specialist within Digital Health, HIV, and Health Group UNDP**

Manish Pant delivered a comprehensive presentation outlining UNDP's remarkable strides in the realm of digital health for development. Notably, he underscored the organization's **extensive portfolio of digital health solutions** – with 118 solutions having been actively deployed across a staggering 70 countries.

Central to the conversation on Digital Health, is **leveraging and harnessing the potential of these innovative solutions** and **propelling them across our vast network** for widespread adoption throughout UNDP and its partners through knowledge sharing. In line with this, the Digital Health for Development Hub, serves as a **One-Stop shop** for technical advisory and partnership support, aligned with WHO norms, standards, and strategies. The Hub collaborates with partners such as WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF, Global Fund, Gavi, and others, while also working internally with different UNDP units to build synergies.

Manish also laid out the functions which define the Hub. These included:

- **Providing technical and advisory support for country-led initiatives** to scale digital Health Solutions
- **Supporting capacity development initiatives** to promote **digital leadership** amongst policymakers and institutions and **strengthening digital literacy and capacity building**
- In **Knowledge Management**, the Hub develops and disseminates **learning and knowledge products** on digital Health across UNDP
- The Hub catalyzes **South-South cooperation** for the purposes of peer learning and mentorship on digital health

Digital Health endeavors are underpinned by a diverse number of resources. These include the **Community of Practice on HIV and Health**, serving as a nexus for health experts and practitioners, the **Digital Health Guide**, which imparts global guidance for integrating digital solutions into health policies, and the **Digital Health for Development Dashboard**, a repository for sharing knowledge and experiences related to UNDP-supported digital health solutions.

Manish also touched upon the steadfast commitment to **open standards, open data, and the promotion of digital public goods**. UNDP actively champions these principles, advocating for the development of health solutions rooted in **open-source technologies and interoperability**. Crucially, UNDP develops solutions with local leaders' companies and innovators that reflect local diversity and knowledge to strengthen **local digital ecosystems** and pursue strategic Partnerships with governments, the community itself, developers, academia, donors, the private sector and other UN agencies on digital solutions and health.

## **Panelist Discussions**

### **Agus Rachmanto, Deputy Chief, Digital Transformation Office, Ministry of Health, Indonesia**

*The Digital transformation within the health sector in Indonesia and what are the key priorities for the government of Indonesia in digitizing public health programmes?*

Agus Rachmanto shared insights on the **country's healthcare digitization journey**. Amid pandemic challenges, Indonesia's responsive leadership paved the way for a transformative strategy supported by UNDP. The strategy itself, **Indonesia's Digital Transformation strategy**, was a combination of both the learning curve of the COVID-19 pandemic and the situation underscoring the urgency of digitalization in healthcare services. The approach entailed **standardizing data, simplifying applications, and fostering community collaboration**. Agus emphasized the significance of these efforts in streamlining health services and making them more user-friendly. **SMILE** - an innovative technological solution that aimed to strengthen the immunization supply chain system in Indonesia - gained traction, aiding government and citizen initiatives, with around 10,000 health facilities employing it for tasks like vaccination distribution.

### [Nomtika Mjwana, Digital Health and Rights Specialist, Global Network of People Living with HIV](#)

*How do digital health technologies in your view help improve access to health services for underserved populations and vulnerable and marginalized people and what role does Civil Society play in shaping digital Health policies and programmes at the country level?*

Nomtika Mjwana, a Digital Health and Rights Specialist from the Global Network of People Living with HIV (GNP Plus), shed light on the profound impact of digital health technologies on the lives of people living with HIV.

Nomtika highlights the organization's collaboration with the Digital Health and Rights Project Consortium, focusing particularly on their research endeavors. Through the lens of this collaboration, she delved into **three key features** that underscore the significance of digital technologies in healthcare and the vital role civil society plays in shaping policies:

- 1) **Improved access to Health Information**: This involves taking a greater look at the role search engines, especially Google, play in providing accurate information on health questions. In particular, this is about addressing issues of **misinformation**, particularly for marginalized communities and for people who are often criminalized and discriminated against and stigmatized. So, this is also about **curating sex-positive and queer-positive safe spaces** for health information
- 2) **Actual Access to Treatment Services**: Nomtika provided a compelling example from Vietnam, where a community of young individuals organized themselves online to ensure access to vital treatments during the COVID-19 pandemic. This illustrated how **digital platforms empower individuals** to collaborate and support one another in maintaining their health.
- 3) **Access to the community**: Nomtika highlighted the significance of digital spaces that foster safe and supportive communities. These spaces enable individuals to share and access necessary healthcare services and connect with appropriate healthcare providers. This **sense of community empowers** marginalized groups and helps find tailored and sex-positive health resources.

### [Kamil Kamaluddeen, Resident Representative, UNDP Chad](#)

In his presentation, Kamil Kamaluddeen, addressed the challenges and successes of implementing digital solutions for health data management and service delivery in the region.

Chad is a vast country, covering 1.284 million km<sup>2</sup> and therefore outreach to immediate and rural populations for the purposes of health services are a challenge, especially given the **inadequate infrastructure and fragmented data systems**. Furthermore, he acknowledged challenges that persist despite their progress, once again citing **weak infrastructure, changing regulations, and capacity**

**limitations** as ongoing hurdles. However, he remains optimistic that with **continuous training and capacity building** these challenges can be overcome, believing that an **empowered workforce is key to navigating obstacles**.

The process of **digitizing health data** was also outlined by Kamil, particularly concerning major operations in collaboration with the Global Fund. These operations focus on distributing insecticide-treated bed nets as part of comprehensive malaria control efforts and the impact of digitization here is tangible, yielding **real-time monitoring, improved coverage, and capacity development for community health workers**. The depth of this approach, as Kamaluddeen highlights, goes beyond just delivering services; it encompasses building resilient and sustainable health systems and fostering a culture of learning within these communities.

In a definitive statement, Kamaluddeen emphasized the inevitable influence of digitization in healthcare. The successes achieved in terms of coverage, monitoring, and capacity building in Chad make the digital transformation an essential contributor to sustainable development. Kamil also recognized the role of countries ahead in digital transformation to **support digitization efforts in resource-constrained nations**, echoing UNDP's aim of leaving no one behind.

### [Sara \(Meg\) Davis, Professor, Digital Health and Rights, University of Warwick](#)

In Meg's presentation, she set about answering what is the **“key transformational impact of digital Technologies on the right to health and what role can UNDP play in this important area?”**

The Digital Health and Rights Project, has the GNP Plus as key founder, alongside the University of Warwick, Kelin Kenya, Privacy International, Restless Development, Stop AIDS and the Universidad de los Andes in Colombia. Meg's initial motivation behind her project was the **lack of empirical evidence** regarding the **genuine impact of digitization on young people in low and middle-income countries**. Existing research largely consisted of **data from high-income countries**, which failed to adequately capture the experiences of end users. To bridge this gap, Meg and her partners embarked on **the Digital Health and Rights Project**, aimed at **understanding how digital technologies empower young adults in these regions while also exacerbating inequalities and raising critical concerns**.

Carrying on from this, Meg also identified the **important role the UNDP** has in **facilitating discussions with governments** about how to adapt to this changing reality, and therefore **commenced participatory action research** in Bangladesh, Colombia, Ghana, Kenya and Vietnam. For the purposes of this research, participatory action research is especially useful in gathering on-the-ground data from over 300 children in 5 different geographic regions. In their peer-review published articles, what they found was that **children used to rely on their peers for information on health, but now they feel empowered in their digital transformation** and how they can **more easily access telemedicine services and make appointments to see doctors**. Notably, **gender disparities surfaced**, as young women were more inclined to seek and share health information online, often with older female relatives. However, digital divides were apparent, encompassing access, affordability, and digital literacy, often intersecting with factors like **gender, age, education, and rural-urban disparities**.

Meg also shed light on the **concerning aspects of digital spaces**, where **abuses such as censorship, misinformation, and bullying** were common and major digital platforms, including Google and Facebook (Meta), and Twitter (X) often **lacked mechanisms for effective redress, prompting the need for international collaboration to govern** these spaces more effectively. Furthermore, **data security and privacy** emerged as pressing concerns, **warranting not only robust policies but also well-equipped**

**national offices** to educate the public about their rights and safety measures.

[Verónica Simán, Deputy Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, UNFPA](#)

**What opportunities and risks do digital technologies present in addressing the gaps in sexual reproductive health?**

Verónica Simán delivered a comprehensive presentation on the **implications of digital technologies in addressing gaps in sexual reproductive health**. Her insightful analysis underscored both the **promising opportunities and potential risks** that arise from integrating digital tools into this critical sphere of healthcare.

Simán first acknowledged the **plethora of opportunities** that digital technologies bring to the field of sexual reproductive health. One of the most significant advantages lies in the **enhanced access to accurate and up-to-date information** of course on the internet, with useful websites and enhanced chatbots which can give individuals **easily accessible comprehensive information** on a range of topics including sex education and contraception. Crucially, this widespread access has the potential to reach even those who are currently marginalized, thus bridging existing gaps in knowledge and leaving no one behind.

In line with the UNFPA's maternal and newborn health strategy, Simán emphasized that digital technologies also hold the **potential to reshape attitudes, behaviours, and health monitoring** related to maternal and newborn care. The integration of digital approaches can bring about improved understanding and behavioural changes, ensuring better health outcomes for mothers and their newborns. The introduction of **telemedicine** also emerges as an innovative opportunity to facilitate healthcare access for individuals living in remote or underserved areas.

Simán went on to share insights into a case study involving **Colombia's response** to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 170 prioritized municipalities, digital healthcare services were employed to **counter the limited access to physical health clinics**. The success of this initiative underlines the effectiveness of digitalization in providing crucial services to women who, due to confinement or health concerns, were unable to leave their homes. Beyond mere information dissemination, digital technologies also enable **self-care practices** in the form of self-sampling for HPV testing, utilizing misoprostol to prevent postpartum hemorrhage, and **self-managing medical abortion** in the first trimester are all potential applications that empower individuals to take charge of their reproductive health.

Another opportunity when it comes to digital technologies in **addressing sexual reproductive health** is **anonymity**. This enables an environment where people, especially young people, are **free to ask sensitive questions** pertaining to reproductive health without fear of judgment. To return to the point about chatbots, they can substantially increase access to accurate information on sexual and reproductive health issues, particularly in societies where **cultural taboos** persist.

A central point of concern to Simán is the **existence of a digital divide** and the **resulting inequitable access to digital technologies**. Many regions still suffer from **limited internet connectivity** and this situation is particularly prevalent in marginalized and rural areas. She also pointed out the potential disparities that may arise due to **varying levels of access to devices** and **digital literacy**, particularly among women.

Like the concerns of Nomtika, misinformation is a significant risk that Simán recognizes. While the internet can be a platform for disseminating useful and accurate information, it can also **propagate false or inaccurate information**, leading to individuals neglecting appropriate care.

**Cybercrime** and **digital violence** were also identified as risks with the potential to undermine health and justice institutions. As digital tools become more widespread, **ensuring their safety and security** becomes crucial in deterring malicious activities. Another concern that goes hand-in-hand with this is **data privacy and security**. Handling sensitive health information raises worries about **breaches, unauthorized access, and the potential for stigmatization or discrimination**. These issues could arise if personal health data were to be accessed without proper authorization, impacting individuals' well-being and privacy.

Finally, Simán also touched upon the fear of **state surveillance** and its potential implications. Particularly for **women seeking abortion services** in regions where abortion is criminalized, the fear of being surveilled and the potential exposure of sensitive information can deter individuals from seeking care. This apprehension further emphasizes the need for **stringent privacy measures** in digital solutions.