



**Transform  
Health**

Health for all in the digital age



## | POLICY BRIEF

Digital Health

# The Role of Parliamentarians in Supporting Digital Health Transformation

UNITE Parliamentarians Network for Global Health & Transform Health

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## INTRODUCTION

Globally, more than half of the world population (about 4.5 billion people) lacks full access to essential health services<sup>1</sup>. As a result, many will not meet their Universal Health Coverage commitments by 2030. Among other reasons, COVID-19 significantly delayed and harmed efforts towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC) leaving many countries off track to meet their commitments. However, it also accelerated the digitalisation of health systems. Health for all cannot be discussed without harnessing the transformative power of digital health. It is now recognised as a necessary component to achieve a more integrated health system and to achieve UHC by 2030. While digital health cannot replace essential health services or core functions, it can complement and enhance them to strengthen health systems, improve health financing, and improve equity by making healthcare accessible to underserved areas and populations. However, given the proliferation and pace with which new technologies are emerging, strong policy and regulatory environment, and robust governance mechanisms are needed to ensure a sustainable, equitable, inclusive, and safe digital health transformation.

Following the [World Health Assembly resolution on digital health in 2018<sup>2</sup>](#), the WHO launched the [Global Strategy on Digital Health<sup>3</sup>](#) to advance UHC and the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Global Initiative on Digital Health (GIDH), launched by the WHO during India's presidency of the G20 in 2023, to support delivery of the Global Strategy, also recognizes digital health as an “accelerator for achieving Universal Health Coverage”.

Parliamentarians are crucial to creating a supportive environment for a sustainable, equitable, inclusive, and safe digital health transformation. They have the authority and expertise to impact national policies and are responsible for national legislation, to enable and regulate innovation, to mobilise the required resources, and to ensure inclusive and equitable access to digital health technologies and digitally enabled health services for all. As such, they can make the right to health a reality. A sustainable, equitable, inclusive, and safe digital transformation requires commitment, leadership, and action, to ensure the legislative, regulatory, and funding environment enables the equitable and inclusive digital transformation of health systems. Parliamentarians are also critical to ensuring digital transformation is funded and that governments are enabled and held accountable to their commitments. This policy brief calls on Parliamentarians to harness the full potential of digital health as a driver of UHC progress and economic growth, and to keep a “[health in all policies](#)” approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Tracking universal health coverage: 2023 global monitoring report. Geneva: World Health Organization and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank; 2023. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. ISBN (WHO) 978-92-4-008037-9.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization. World Health Assembly resolution on digital health in 2018. Available at: [https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/279505/A71\\_R7-en.pdf?sequence=1](https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/279505/A71_R7-en.pdf?sequence=1). Checked on 8 November 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Global strategy on digital health 2020-2025. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. ISBN 978-92-4-002092-4. Available at : <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/344249/9789240020924-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

## KEY POLICY AREAS IN DIGITAL HEALTH

There is an urgent need to prioritize policy and legislative reform to ensure a sustainable, equitable, inclusive, and safe digital health transformation. The following are key priorities that should be considered by parliamentarians to advocate for, and support the development of laws for appropriate integration and scaling up of digital solutions to strengthen health systems:

### 1) **Allocate sufficient funding and adopt sustainable financing models**

To support the digital transformation of health systems, as part of wider health system strengthening investment and national plans, we need to allocate sufficient funding, and adopt sustainable financing models. A recent report by Transform Health estimates an investment need of approximately US\$12.5 billion over the next five years in low and lower-middle income countries.<sup>4</sup> Resources also need to be directed to the right areas to ensure equity and sustainability, including creating an enabling environment and adequate digital public infrastructure (DPI), which is critical to the long-term viability and scalability of digital health initiatives. Investing in DPIs for health is crucial for achieving UHC and promoting SDGs, due to health's intersection with other sectors like finance, education, climate, etc., as well as to ensure stable economic growth. In addition, by investing in digital public goods like open-source software, digital training resources, and data-sharing platforms, governments can reduce costs, foster innovation, and enhance collaboration.

Parliamentarians have the capacity to advocate for increased government funding for DPIs dedicated to digital health transformation, emphasizing its direct impact on improving healthcare access and outcomes, especially in underserved regions. Additionally, Parliamentarians can encourage the use of alternative financing models, such as public-private partnerships, to supplement investment, ensuring a robust, multi-faceted financial foundation for the digital health ecosystem.

### 2) **Strengthen health data governance**

Robust health data governance is essential to protect individual rights, to address issues around data privacy, and to mitigate risk of data misuse. More effective and equitable health data governance is also needed to support responsible data sharing for public benefit, with the needed protections in place. This involves establishing comprehensive legislation and regulations to govern the ethical collection, storage, management, sharing, and use of health data.

Parliamentarians can play a pivotal role in strengthening health data governance by updating and enacting comprehensive data governance laws and regulations that reflect the evolving digital landscape, address the unique sensitivities of health information and data, and are grounded in equity and rights-based principles<sup>5</sup>. They

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<sup>4</sup> Transform Health. Closing the digital divide: More and better funding for the digital transformation of health. Basel: Transform Health; 2022. Available at: <https://transformhealthcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Closing-the-digital-divide-mainReport.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Health Data Governance Principles. Available at: <https://healthdataprinciples.org/>. Checked on 08 November 2023.

are crucial to coordinating regional legislation and standards on aligned issues that impact the digital health framework. They can also ensure the right mechanisms and funding for the enforcement of these laws and regulations, and for the education of the public and stakeholders on data rights and responsibilities are in place, ensuring a culture of accountability and transparency within healthcare ecosystems. Additionally, by working with parliamentarians, governments, and other stakeholders around the world, it is easier to foster international collaboration around the endorsement of a set of minimum standards for health data governance regulations to build consensus, strengthen harmonisation and support national approaches. Once such standards are defined, international cooperation will also be easier.

### **3) Preventing and addressing the digital divide, both within countries and internationally**

Across all countries there are differences in access to health. These differences can be reduced through the effective and equitable use of digital technologies in health. However, currently many people are not able to fully benefit from digital technologies in health because of a lack of connectivity and access. Governments need to ensure the health divide is not exacerbated by a digital divide as health systems increasingly adopt new technologies to respond to the health needs of their population. This requires the intentional design and deployment of technology in a manner that addresses the specific needs of diverse populations. Moreover, ensuring digital technology and tools are categorized as essential medical equipment can further enhance equitable access to digital health services and, thus, progress towards UHC goals. Parliamentarians are in an exceptional position to ensure that national resources are distributed in such a way that allows for all of those to be overcome, including coverage gaps, gender divide, affordability issues, and digital literacy.

However, as technology evolves and more countries start to engage in this area, another digital divide starts to emerge internationally. One between the different countries, according to their level of implementation of digital health transformation. In that sense, Parliamentarians can also push for policies that promote technology transfer, supporting capacity building in less developed regions, and incentivizing the private sector to design inclusive and affordable solutions.

Furthermore, ensuring an equitable response to technological innovation, especially in the realm of cross-border information sharing, requires coordinated international regulation and collaboration. Inadequate regulatory mechanisms can further lead to digital divide among nations. This involves establishing universal standards and protocols for new technologies like AI, which respect individual rights, promote data security, and ensure that the benefits of digital advancements are accessible to all, regardless of geographical location. Parliamentarians are responsible for ratifying such agreements at national level, so it is important for them to be aware and involved in these discussions, so that they are better prepared. Through these efforts, they can help foster a global digital health environment where innovation drives universal improvement, rather than exacerbating existing inequalities.

### **4) Invest in a digitally enabled health workforce**

A critical part of the digital transformation of health systems is ensuring a digitally enabled and supported health workforce. This is vital to harness the full potential

of innovation in healthcare and ensure that advances are effectively translated into accessible, high-quality care for all, including the most marginalized groups.

With the promotion of digitalisation in all sectors, Parliamentarians can advocate for funding for continuous learning and professional training programs (e.g., Professional Development Programs) and to integrate digital health competencies into medical education and curricula for all cadres of health workers. They can explore redefining essential health personnel to include IT staff given the rapid scale of digitization in the health sector. Parliamentarians can also push for health workers to be consulted in the design and introduction of new technologies, tools, and approaches into the healthcare system to ensure they are user-friendly, practical, and tailored to patients' needs. Finally, they can advocate for strategies that ensure that healthcare workers from all regions and backgrounds have access to the same tools and training opportunities. Thus, helping prevent the emergence of a new digital divide within the healthcare workforce itself.

## CONCLUSION

To harness the full potential of Digital health, we need to set clear priorities, strengthen collaborations, and identify clear actions. Therefore, UNITE and Transform Health call on all Parliamentarians to reinforce their commitments to prioritising digital health transformation, including by:

1. **Ensuring adequate and sustainable funding for digital health transformation.** Parliamentarians should advocate for increased budgetary allocation, for alternative financing models, and for the creation of a transparent environment that facilitates private sector collaboration and investment.
2. Establish a **legal foundation for health data governance** to allow the establishment of a comprehensive digitised health system, capable of supporting the nation in reaching UHC.
3. **Minimise the digital divide** both within their countries and internationally. Ensure that there are adequate infrastructures and economic capacity for all users and workers of the national health system to benefit from digital healthcare services.
4. Promote investment to support the **digital enablement of the health workforce** to equitably adapt to new technologies. This includes encouraging continuous training programmes for health personal and have meaningful engagement with them to use new tools to reach every single person.
5. **Implement a “health in all policies” approach**, recognising health as an economic driver and a prerequisite for action in all other sectors.

Parliamentarians are key to supporting countries in reaching their SDGs goals, including the goal to achieve Universal Health Coverage by 2030. Correct implementation and regulation of digitalisation of healthcare systems will be an essential component in this journey. UNITE and Transform Health are committed to supporting Parliamentarians in this objective.