



## CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE:

# MORE AND BETTER FUNDING FOR THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF HEALTH

## Towards a youth-centred approach to investments in the digital transformation of health

*Building on Transform Health's report, [Closing the digital divide: More and better funding for the digital transformation of health](#)<sup>1</sup>, this policy brief explores a youth-centred approach to investments in the digital transformation of health, with recommendations from youth for policymakers.*

The world's health systems are changing rapidly, driven by the introduction of digital technologies, artificial intelligence and the use of large data sets. The digital transformation has the potential to expand access to health care and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal target of reaching universal health coverage by 2030. We have reached a stage in the digital health journey where we need to think beyond enhancing health systems through the introduction of individual digital technologies to instead consider the digital transformation of health systems in its broader sense.

Today, nearly 20% (1.8 billion) of the world's population is younger than 25 years of age, with this number projected to increase to 40% (3.3 billion) by 2030<sup>2</sup>. This generation of youth (those between the ages of 15-24) is the most digitally connected and engaged generation to date<sup>3</sup>. Having grown up amidst radical digital transformation, rapidly changing information ecosystems, and widespread

integration of digital technologies, particularly in health systems, youth are keen users of digital technologies for health and possess unique and invaluable lived experiences with the digital transformation of health<sup>4</sup>. Through networks such as Young Experts: Tech 4 Health, youth across the world have also demonstrated an increased interest in shaping the digital transformation of health to better meet their

<sup>1</sup> Transform Health. [Closing the digital divide: More and better funding for the digital transformation of health](#). Basel: Transform Health; 2022 [bit.ly/digital-health-funding](https://bit.ly/digital-health-funding)

<sup>2</sup> UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division. [World population prospects](#). Retrieved from: <https://population.un.org/wpp/> [Online Resource]

<sup>3</sup> Max Roser, Hannah Ritchie and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina (2015) - "Internet". Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: '<https://ourworldindata.org/internet>' [Online Resource]

<sup>4</sup> Governing Health Futures 2030 Commission (2021) [Digital health futures: Insights into young people's use and opinions of digital health technologies](#). Summary report of a 2020 U-Report poll. Geneva. Retrieved from <http://www.governinghealthfutures2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Digital-health-futures-U-Report.pdf>

needs<sup>5</sup>. They have a major stake in decisions and policies that impact their health futures, such as the digital solutions and tools with which they engage<sup>6</sup>, and it is, therefore crucial to include their voices, ensure their meaningful participation, and enhance their role in all aspects of the digital transformation of health. Many youth are faced with social, economic, and legal barriers that limit the extent to which they can meaningfully benefit from digital health solutions. These stem from issues such as inadequate information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure, poor or non-existent data governance and protection mechanisms, poorly designed digital health solutions that fail to cater to their unique needs, and insufficient capacity to navigate digital transformation or meaningfully engage with digital technologies. When compounded, their effects can ultimately limit the agency of youth, lead to inequity, and generate distrust in policymakers and health systems.

## Current outlook

The potential of digital technologies to improve the reach and efficiency of health care has been evident for at least 20 years. Its uptake, however, has been relatively slow, uneven, unsystematic and mostly limited to individual products, services and processes, and has typically been spearheaded by a specific disease response. Along with a large number of pilot projects that do not progress to a system-wide or national scale adoption, this has led to a fragmented landscape and approach to the digital transformation of health systems.

The implementation challenges that countries face to harness the benefits of digital technologies to strengthen health systems are

multifaceted and complex. These include, but are not limited to, a lack of financial investments to meet the massive scale up requirements; weak policy and regulatory frameworks governing who collects and owns personal data, and how it is used; a lack of universal internet access; and inadequate digital literacy and trust to meaningfully uptake digital health. Moreover, if not appropriately managed the use of new digital technologies may exacerbate existing inequalities and exclude already marginalised groups and individuals.

Recent international strategies, such as the WHO's Global Strategy on Digital Health 2020-2025, sets out strategic frameworks with key objectives and priorities for how countries should approach the digital transformation of their health sectors<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, academic reports, such as The Lancet and Financial Times Commission on Governing health futures 2030: Growing up in a digital world, have examined the wider determinants of accelerating digital transformation of health and proposed a value-based framework for what digital transformation should achieve with a focus on youth.

## Closing the funding gap

*Closing the digital divide: More and better funding for the digital transformation of health* proposes a Conceptual Framework to guide investments and action towards health for all in a digital age<sup>8</sup>. It estimates that an investment of at least US\$ 12.5 billion is needed to support the digital transformation of health systems in low- and lower-middle-income countries (L/LMICs) over the next five years, or an average of US\$ 2.5 billion a year. This is based on funding for nine priority digital health investment areas in these countries. The full investment requirement

<sup>5</sup> Young Experts: Tech 4 Health, (2023) "Advocacy & Messaging Framework". Retrieved from <https://yet4h.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Doc-Final.pdf> [Online Resource]

<sup>6</sup> Louise Holly, Brian LH Wong, Anurag Agrawal et al. (2021) "Opportunities and threats for adolescent well-being provided by digital transformations. Background paper for multi-stakeholder consultations on programming to promote adolescent well-being." Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, Geneva 2021. Retrieved from: <https://pmnch.who.int/resources/publications/m/item/opportunities-and-threats-for-adolescent-well-being-provided-by-digital-transformations> [Online Resource]

<sup>7</sup> WHO Global Strategy on digital health 2020-2025. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/documents/gs4dh-daa2a9f352b0445bafbc79ca799dce4d.pdf> [online resource]

<sup>8</sup> Transform Health. Closing the digital divide: More and better funding for the digital transformation of health. Basel: Transform Health; 2022. [bit.ly/digital-health-funding](https://bit.ly/digital-health-funding)

will ultimately be determined country by country and based on costed plans. Moreover, it will need to be complemented by broader investment to increase digital connectivity and usage among the population and to address the wider enabling environment.

## **Youth engagement for more effective and inclusive digital health transformation**

Youth-led research and consultations that contributed to the development of the 'Closing the digital divide' report, clearly outline the importance of meaningfully engaging youth in every step and all processes of digitally transforming health systems.

Results from a youth participatory research survey indicated that youth use social media and smartphone apps as health tools but have varying levels of awareness of the wider variety of digital health interventions and digital solutions used for health. Youth believe they could benefit greatly from digital health interventions, yet they often feel excluded or less prioritised in the consultation, content development, and design of digital health interventions.

The youth research highlights how youth have traditionally experienced a lack of trust when using digital services, both regarding how their data is being used or protected and the reliability of online health information. It also conveys young people's concerns about the effectiveness of current legislation for data governance and the lack of standardisation among different digital health-related policies.

Youth call on public and private investors to ensure that when digital health solutions are built, they are fit for purpose and as beneficial as possible for all youth who interact with them. They also underscore several vital areas where targeted investment is needed to enable health

systems undergoing digital transformation to be more sustainable and inclusive, particularly for youth in low and lower-middle-income countries. These include increased investment in digital health financing, digital health literacy, training of health care providers, monitoring and evaluation and learning of current programs, and generating evidence for the need for digital health interventions.

## Recommendations from youth for policymakers

Building on the recommendations set out in *Closing the digital divide: More and better funding for the digital transformation of health*,<sup>3</sup> this policy brief makes the following recommendations for investments in the digital transformations of health:



### 1 - Meaningful engagement of youth as key stakeholders of digital transformation.

To make digital transformations work for youth, they must be included in any process or strategy for digitally transforming national health systems. Policymakers must consider youth explicitly and intentionally and integrate their experiences and ideas in all phases of digital health transformation, including design, development, key governance decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. Such participation needs to be supported financially to ensure that youth across all strata of society are represented. Doing so will allow youth to leverage their unique position as actors and consumers of digital health and ensure that digital tools, services, interventions, and infrastructure are genuinely inclusive and fit for purpose.



### 2 - Prioritise investments in digital infrastructure to close existing digital divides.

Recognising the pervasive digital divides that still exist in the world, governments and private sector actors must prioritise digital expansion through enhanced investments in infrastructure, resource creation, capacity building, and digital literacy to guarantee equal access and agency over primary healthcare through digital health for everyone. Closing the digital divide is a core human rights agenda and must empower and equitably include youth, women, and other marginalised groups.



### 3 - Build the digital capacity of youth and the health workforce.

As many aspects of healthcare and services move to digital platforms, governments and other stakeholders should invest in building the digital capacity of the health workforce (much of which comprises young health workers) at all levels, as well as the youth who will interact with these digitally transformed health systems. Doing so will ensure that youth and the health workforce can fully benefit from and collectively harness the potential of digital technologies to expand access to health and improve the quality of care for all.

<sup>3</sup> Transform Health. *Closing the digital divide: More and better funding for the digital transformation of health*. Basel: Transform Health; 2022. [bit.ly/digital-health-funding](https://bit.ly/digital-health-funding)



#### 4 - Establish a robust regulatory framework and policy environment.

Governments must dedicate financial and human resources to develop appropriate data governance regulations and data protection policies. Strong regulations can facilitate easy, equal, and safe access to, and use of, digital health infrastructure for all. It will help coordinate action between all relevant stakeholders and ensure that all users of digital health technologies and services are protected and that their data is secure. Moreover, it will ensure that no one is left behind in the process of digitally transforming health systems.

## A Call to Action

Increased digitalisation of all aspects of life, including health, will continue swiftly over the coming years. Left unchecked, digital transformation risks exacerbating existing inequalities and digital divides for the growing youth population. Future digital transformation of health must therefore be developed with and for young people with well-directed investments to achieve better health outcomes and greater inclusion. Only through a youth-centred approach can the full potential of digital technologies and data be harnessed to build more robust and resilient health systems for generations to come.