

Progress report on the regional strategy for fostering digital health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 2023–2027

Introduction

1. The WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region faces several challenges to achieving universal health coverage. These include conflict, environmental threats and natural disasters. Digital health can be an effective tool in mitigating these challenges and improving people's health in the Region.
2. The Region has made significant progress in using digital health technologies in recent years. However, there is still a considerable gap between the potential of digital health to improve health outcomes and the current state of its adoption and use in the Region.
3. Smartphone penetration in the Region is increasing rapidly, which has provided a significant opportunity to expand access to digital health services. There is also growing interest in digital health from governments and donors in the Region. This is providing new opportunities for investment and collaboration. There are also many innovative startups and companies developing and deploying digital health solutions.
4. However, a significant proportion of the population in the Region still does not have access to reliable internet connectivity and smart devices. This limits their ability to use digital health services. Moreover, many people in the Region lack the digital literacy skills needed to use digital health services effectively.
5. There is need for more robust governance for digital health in the Region. This entails developing national digital health strategies, establishing regulatory frameworks and building capacity for digital health governance. There is also a need for increased investment in digital health in the Region, including funding for developing, implementing and evaluating digital health solutions.
6. In light of these opportunities and challenges, and building on the experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean endorsed resolution EM/RC69/R.6 on the regional strategy for fostering digital health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (2023–2027) in October 2022.
7. This report provides a progress update on implementation of the regional strategy by Member States and WHO since then.

Progress achieved since 2022

8. Following the endorsement of the resolution, efforts were made to enhance the organization of the support provided by WHO to the countries of the Region. WHO initiated the establishment of a new unit for digital health and innovation in the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean to consolidate the required action.
9. In addition, a comprehensive regional action plan has been developed to guide the implementation of digital health initiatives in countries, taking into consideration factors such as the current state of health care infrastructure and technology, availability of skilled personnel, cultural and social differences, and potential impact on patient outcomes and overall health care system efficiency.

10. The regional action plan fleshes out the approach endorsed in resolution EM/RC69/R.6, drawing on the latest global thinking and best practices. It aims to leverage digital technologies to enhance health care outcomes and health and well-being more generally within countries and across the Region, and is informed by input from various sources, including a literature review, a regional digital health survey, expert interviews and technical feedback from Member State focal points.

11. The action plan characterizes countries in the Region into three categories related to digital health: basic, emerging and advanced. For each category, the action plan presents a tailored list of objectives built around SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals. These goals focus on improving digital health literacy, expanding access to digital health technologies and strengthening digital health governance and data security. The plan aims for an increase in the percentage of health care workers with a basic understanding of digital health technologies from 20% to 80% by 2025 and an increase in the percentage of households with internet access from 30% to 60% by 2025. It also aims for the development and implementation of national digital health policies in all countries in the Region by 2025 and an improvement in access to health care for underserved populations in advanced countries within the Region through digital health technologies by 2027.

12. The plan outlines key actions for scaling up digital health in the Region in the following areas:

- strengthening digital health governance, norms and standards at regional, national and subnational levels;
- advocating for digital health systems and networks that are people-centred, based on regional and national analysis, and supported and enabled by digital technologies, services and applications;
- advancing the development, implementation and evaluation of national digital health strategies, consistent with digital health maturity and linked to advancing national capacities and digital health literacy; and
- promoting regional and national stakeholder collaboration towards advancing digital transformation, knowledge translation and innovation.

13. WHO has also provided technical support to several countries for the development or implementation of their national strategies on digital health. This has included support for the development and finalization of national strategies for digital health in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia, and this support is currently being expanded to Djibouti, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco and Yemen.

14. Globally, including in the Region, WHO is facilitating the use of digital health technology for the linkage of patient and health data between countries. A successful example was the implementation during the Hajj in 2024 of data exchange using the International Patient Summary (IPS) between Saudi Arabia and two other countries.

Way forward

15. In response to country needs, WHO has expanded its technical work on the digitalization of national health information systems, and a regional strategy on this is being presented to the Regional Committee this year for its endorsement. The strategy is built upon a regional technical consultation held in Jordan in July 2024.

16. It is expected that more countries in the Region will opt to develop national strategies for digital health, possibly in combination with national strategies for health information systems. Digital health is highlighted in WHO's Fourteenth General Programme of Work, adopted by Member States at the Seventy-seventh World Health Assembly in May 2024, and WHO is expanding its work in this area.

17. WHO is also expanding its technical support for the establishment of national structures for digital health, the adoption and implementation of the necessary standards, and the use of digital public infrastructures.

18. Focused attention is being given to United Nations interagency coordination and alignment using global and regional mechanisms, such as the Regional Health Alliance and the World Summit on the Information Society, as well as national coordination mechanisms, to ensure country support is in line with national priorities for health and to avoid the duplication of efforts.

19. Lastly, there is a growing focus on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in health care and health decision-making. WHO is working with several countries on the use of AI in a number of areas, including disease surveillance, decision-making, the quality of health care services and research. To support this work, new guidance has been issued on the governance and safety aspects of the use of AI in health systems.