

**REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN
Sixty-eighth Session
Cairo, Egypt, 11–14 October 2021**

October 2021

**IS THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION READY FOR
DIGITALIZING HEALTH?
IMPLICATIONS FROM THE GLOBAL STRATEGY ON DIGITAL HEALTH
(2020–2025)**

Objectives of the event

The objectives of the event are to:

- raise awareness of Member States on the importance of adopting the GSDH and developing national strategies on digital health and innovation;
- share experiences and best practices of Member States on digital health and innovation.
- encourage Member States to allocate resources, build capacities and request technical support for innovative digital health solutions.

Background

Effective implementation of digital health technologies is increasingly recognized as crucial for efficient national and subnational health systems. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics and the Internet of Things offer limitless opportunities for health innovations that lead to tangible improvements in health outcomes. Countries across the world are looking to establish a sound evidence-base for optimal investment in digital health to address national and subnational health priorities, and this may be particularly important in the Eastern Mediterranean Region given the wide socioeconomic disparities, conflicts and emergencies in many countries of the Region.

At the Seventy-first World Health Assembly in 2018, all 194 WHO Member States unanimously adopted resolution WHA71.7 in support of the GSDH, recognizing the potential of digital technologies to support health systems in health promotion and disease prevention and to improve the accessibility, quality and affordability of health services (see Fig. 1 for the objectives, outcomes and expected impact of the GSDH). Subsequently, two more decisions in support of the GSDH were adopted by the Executive Board (EB146/26) and the World Health Assembly (WHA73(28)) in 2020.

Supporting digital health is echoed in *Vision 2023*, which calls for launching a health innovation programme and advancing the use of information technology by introducing the latest tools and innovations. It is anticipated that if Member States adopt/implement/support the GSDH by the actions summarized in Fig. 2, this would assist in achieving output 4.1.3 of WHO's Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2023, as well as the health-related Sustainable Development Goals.

There is a need to develop ethically sound policies on innovative digital technology solutions to protect populations from potential adverse impacts of the inappropriate use of technology and enhance governance capacity and mechanisms to implement and uphold those policies. Perceived need by Member

States for innovative digital health solutions for the COVID-19 response (such as for artificial intelligence, telehealth, telemedicine, contact tracing and NCD control).

Challenges

The infrastructure for digital health and innovation is scarce or fragmented in countries of the Region and there are major interoperability and connectivity challenges. Limited country capacities, scarce resources and lack of trained workforce for digital health and innovation are issues in the Region, which are compounded by the concurrent demands for digital innovation in the light of the COVID-19 response. There is a need for an evidence-base on the effectiveness of digital health and innovation in responding to health challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Expected outcomes

- Member States awareness raised on the importance of adopting the GSDH, developing national strategies on digital health and innovation in response to decision WHA73(28), and taking short, medium, long-term actions.
- Experiences and best practices on digital health and innovation shared between Member States.
- Member States encouraged to allocate resources, build capacities and request technical support for innovative digital health solutions.



Fig. 1. Summary of GSDH objectives, outcomes and expected impact

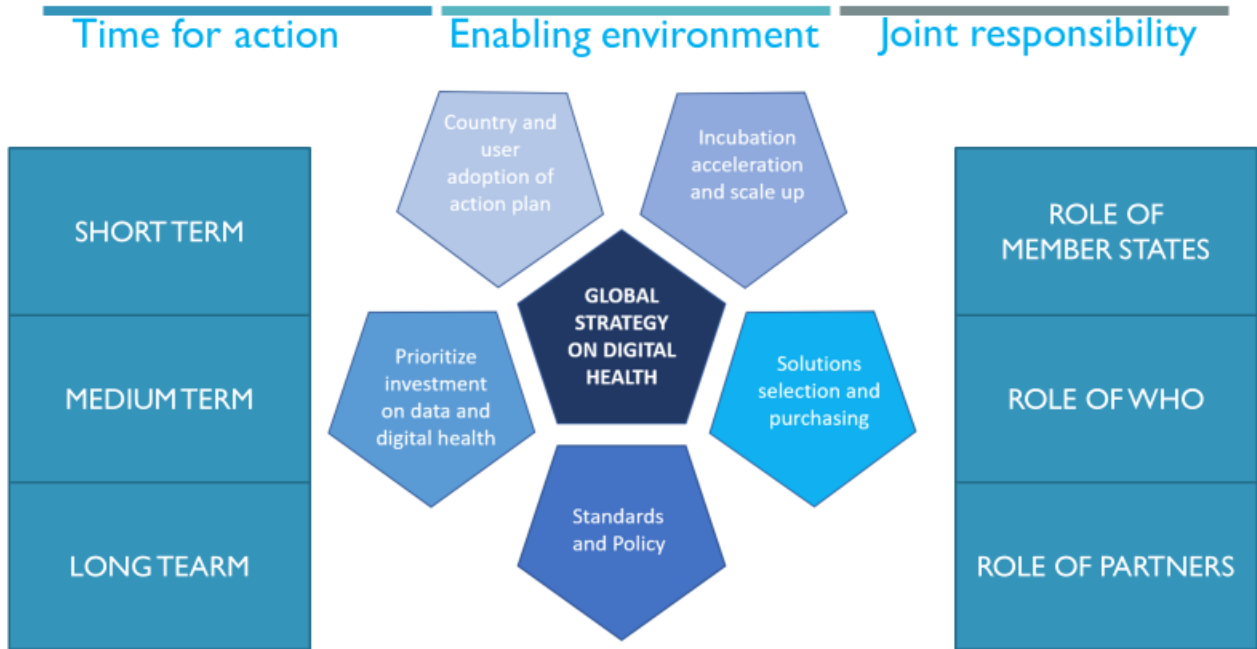


Fig. 2. Needed short-, medium- and long-term action by Member States