

AFRICA DIGITAL HEALTH REQUIRES INDIGENOUS APPROACHES

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Africa is one of the continent of the universe where health challenges are extremely critical. Study shows that out the 57 nations of the universe are suffering from a critically low healthcare personnel according to the World Health Organization, 36 of which are in Africa, with 0.21 doctors for every 1,000 patients. It was observed that Africa continent has only 1.3 percent of healthcare workers, still it has 25 percent of the global disease challenges.

The epidemiological transition in the continent is yet to be completed and therefore meet double challenges. Effort must be exerted to eradicate endemic diseases such as AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, also to fight against chronic diseases like diabetes and cancer. Recently discovered to the above mentioned are the emerging infectious diseases such as COVID-19, Ebola, Lassa fever, and Monkeypox.

Financial challenges of health systems are parts of the challenges in Africa. In this, majority of the African countries are yet to achieved the targets set in the 2001, in which governments agreed to allocate 15 percent of their national budgets to health.

It has been confirmed that digital technology is a major factor that will enlarge universal health coverage that will eliminate quite a number of barriers like costs, difficult access and lack of quality and effective care.

There are several benefits that digital health provides. They include; developing easy access to health care services most importantly for those in hard-to-reach areas, developments in safety and quality of healthcare services rendered, increase knowledge and access of healthcare workers and communities to health information; cost savings and efficiencies in health services delivery; and advance in access to the social, economic and environmental determinants of health, all of which could contribute to the attainment of UHC.

Digital health deployment in African continent is constrained by many challenges, which are poor coordination of mushrooming pilot projects, weak health systems, poor awareness and knowledge about digital health, lack of infrastructure like unstable power supply, poor internet connectivity and lack of interoperability of the numerous digital health solutions.

Inclusion of digital health to achieve universal health coverage requires the physical presence of elements like resilient health system, communities and access to the social and economic determinants of health.

Global Digital health - Statistics & Facts

Before looking at the peculiar needs of African countries on digital health. There is a need to examine the global views of the impact of digital health.

According to Statista Research Department, Aug 11, 2022. The following findings revealed that in 2019, the global digital health market was worth an estimated 175 billion U.S. dollars. With an expected CAGR of almost 25 percent from 2019 to 2025, the digital health market should reach nearly 660 billion dollars by 2025.

Also, this statistic showed that the total funding made by investors in the digital health industry from 2010 to 2020. It was revealed that in 2020, funding by investors in the digital health industry totalled 21.6 billion U.S. dollars - the largest amount so far.

On the other hand, the statistic shows the top funded digital health categories worldwide during 2020. In that year, over 4.2 billion U.S. dollars of funding was provided for telemedicine which makes it by far the most funded category.

Rate of Digital Health Usage in African Continent

The report clearly reflects that a healthcare industry is on the verge of transformation. While Governments are gradually accelerating formal digital health strategies – 41 out of 54 African countries have a digital health strategy in place and consumers are dramatically increasing their engagement with digital health services via their various smart-phones. Forecast shows that by 2025, smart-phone reach in sub-Saharan Africa will increase by almost 70%.

In view of this, informal use of digital healthcare solutions has increased, with 41% of internet users across Africa regularly using their mobile phones to search for health information. Digital health applications have also seen tremendous usage during the covid-19 pandemic.

The call for Indigenous Digital Health Approach

In order to avoid the risks associated with healthcare workers and citizens becoming estranged with the digital health transformation, the architecture of a health ecosystem must be led by African Union Government. As such, the report calls for more indigenous approach in the designing of digital health platform, to care for the peculiar nature of the continent, requires holistic attention between the public sector and digital health providers on formal systems. It is advisable that, African Union Government can more effectively manage the digital health ecosystem, encouraging the integration of effective start-ups into formal systems and regulating those that could cause harm and spread misinformation.

The fact that, the African continent requires to learn from how digital health thrives in developed world, should not allow us to apply the same methods imported for our use. Africa has a unique and peculiar health and environmental issues that developed world can not solve.

It is therefore important that each African nations should be carefully studied, and standard be set, that will accommodate various needs, that will not contradict the W.H.O digital health strategy.

The studies showed that 89% of the digital health tools, such as EMRs/EHRs, Telemedicine/Telehealth solutions did not undergo any research on the peculiar situations of some healthcare environments before adoption, therefore, becoming non-user friendly, and later abandoned.

African digital health tools developers needs to be equipped with the necessary knowledge that will enable them to factor in African methods, in order to have a lasting and efficient platform that will effectively serve the continent.

African Union Government needs to develop a standard indigenous digital health policy and to embark on a quest in searching and bringing creative digital health tools developer from different nations, with adequate provision of the necessary trainings and equipments that will aid them in building a durable platforms that will serve the entire continent.

The result also showed that the adoption of non-indigenous digital health tools poses grave risks of healthcare data confidentiality to the continent. The need therefore, to protect digital healthcare data should be the topmost priority of the African leaders, through the establishment of African Agency for Data Protection (AADP)- *(please note: this agency is not existing in Africa. It is just my ideology).*

Healthcare data has become the world number one most treasured asset, and its huge exposure to the cyber-criminals through technology requires that Africa needs to commence the design and creation of indigenous digital health tools, with better security measures, to prevent the stealing of these data, by hackers.

Lastly, success of this implementation will depend on the Africa's ability to leverage the informal within the formal. Given the pervasive use of social media, various application and internet searches, it's necessary to find a way of using these digital health tools safely within the Africa health ecosystem.