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# Applying Digital Health to Universal Health - July 2023

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## Summary

**A**frica is seeing an outbreak of infectious and noncommunicable diseases as a result of inadequate health infrastructure, regional disparities in medical/paramedical resources, and a lack of information offered to patients. African nations must create practical, cost-effective, and easily accessible technology solutions to address inefficiencies including resource shortages in their healthcare system. Digital healthcare is steadily progressing and gaining traction. Several projects and advancements have occurred in order to better harness technology for healthcare delivery and access. The rapid expansion of internet penetration and the number of web and social media users in Africa are positive indicators of technological solutions.

### AfroPHC's Policy Framework for PHC and UHC in Africa

African Forum for Primary Health Care (AfroPHC) will launch a policy framework in 2023 entitled "Building Primary Health Care (PHC) Teams for Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in Africa". This policy will emphasise the critical role of PHC staff within a team-based approach. It will also outline the significant activities Africa needs to undertake to build a successful PHC for UHC in Africa. The Primary Health Care Performance Initiative (PHCPI) has provided support for this framework, which reflects the perspectives of primary health care personnel and leaders from across Africa, as obtained through a series of virtual workshops and group discussions.

## Digital Health in West Africa

The adoption and utilisation of digital health systems in the West African region demand many vital initiatives to establish communities in favor of digitisation. The West Africa region has access to digital health in partnership with the Transform Health Coalition to establish a network among French-speaking African nations. The initial surveys in Senegal, Benin, including Mali regions revealed several outcomes bounded by a

- Lack of a comprehensive legal, political, and regulatory structure for digital health
- The Dominant role of organisations to represent civil society in the creation and utilisation of digital platforms
- Absence of collaboration among several initiatives that exist
- Inadequate digital literacy across all levels (decision-makers, entrepreneurs, populations)
- Lack of consistency despite the commitment of regional organisations such as WAHO (West African Health Organisation) to digitisation

## Healthcare in Nigeria

Nigeria needs a healthy workforce to sustain a thriving economy. The population of Nigeria has more than quadrupled in the last 30 years to 218 million (estimates of 2022) and is expected to grow to 440 million by 2050 (in 28 years). The current as well as future demands on healthcare are diverse and enormous which is considerably beyond the current healthcare system's capacities. To avoid system collapse in the years to come, Nigeria must develop a robust, functional, reliable, affordable health system accessible to all Nigerians, regardless of social rank, financial level or geographical location. As the world continues to digitise, stakeholders pursue immediate and long-term answers to the many difficulties that face the sector, particularly the opportunities presented by digital healthcare.

### The Development of the Digital Health Sector in Nigeria

In Nigeria, several barriers limit access to health services through the traditional health system. These impediments have increased the desire for creative techniques that advance primary healthcare and contribute to universal coverage. Self-care interventions help health systems to provide opportunities to increase coverage and access, reduce health inequities, improve the quality of services, enhance health, and reduce cost.

Nigeria is the first African country to produce a national self-care guide for sexual, reproductive, and maternal health based on the WHO guidelines for self-care interventions for health and well-being.





## How Can Digital Health Help?

The digital transformation of healthcare in Nigeria has immense potential, and this optimism hinges on the markets, investors, and Nigerian people's relative competence rather than the preparation of healthcare institutions and policymakers. Nigeria has 214 million active phone lines and 153 million active internet connections as of October 2022. As per the newly disclosed numbers from the Nigeria Communications Commission (NCC), broadband penetration in Nigeria went up to 48% from 41% in January 2022. The country's internet customers increased from 149.78 million in May 2022 to 159.59 million in May 2023.

Over the previous two decades, the adoption of digital technology by the Nigerian (primarily youth) population has been extremely promising. Young people are often among the initial adopters of current technologies and they have the potential to capitalise on advancements in this field to drive the effect of social entrepreneurship.

### Leverage Digital Health

There are two major areas where digital health can make significant developments. First is in the field of Telemedicine and Remote Consultations that will allow patients to communicate with healthcare providers without the need for in-person visits. Another focused area is Mobile health applications that will provide individuals with information, education, and self-care tools.

## What Can We Do Differently to Make Universal Health Insurance Work in Nigeria?

- Active involvement of government officials from both national and subnational levels will assist in accelerating the pace of transition to establish health insurance plans
- Integrating technology-driven and accountability tools into healthcare delivery systems will help public/government bodies to identify areas of poor performance. Several tools are available to detect, track, and measure corruption in the healthcare business

- Investigate the impact of digital technologies on better health insurance enrolment and fair access to the utilisation of healthcare services by vulnerable populations
- Healthcare providers' capitations must be realistic and made on schedule each month. Based on international human rights law, enrollees must be free to choose any mix of public/private health sector providers at any given point in time
- A well-funded and functional NHIS scheme will incentivise more private healthcare providers to invest more financial resources and improve their capacity resulting in improved health outcomes for all

## Lancet Nigeria Commission

The Lancet Nigeria Commission aims to redefine future Nigerian health policy to achieve universal healthcare and better health for everyone. Despite the country's reputation for tough governance, recent events have shown that considerable improvements are possible. The creation of the Basic Health Care Provision Fund initiative, as well as the introduction of state health insurance has provided an important foundation for future changes.

The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) has improved infectious disease surveillance, which has resulted in timely national data coverage on COVID-19 and monkeypox outbreaks. Similarly, the National Agency for the Control of AIDS (NACA) completed the largest-ever population-based HIV/AIDS survey within the authorised budget and on schedule. The Commission hopes to provide a new road to improved health, with implications for development, wealth creation, and human capital enhancement, mainly to set up comprehensive ways to enhance all aspects of healthcare in Nigeria.



## Mandatory Health Insurance in Nigeria and a Journey Towards Universal Health Coverage

### Compulsory Clear Digital Healthcare Policy

The digital healthcare strategy will provide healthcare action plans suited to the healthcare system's technological realities and shortcomings. The objective is to harness rapid advances in digital technology to provide efficient health systems and universal healthcare. Such a policy will help the country avoid the pitfalls of poorly coordinated and disjointed digital health initiatives by various stakeholders.

### Mandatory Health Insurance Coverage

The National Health Insurance Authority (NHIA) Bill 2022 is an initiative of the government to attain universal health coverage (UHC). The 'Vulnerable Group Fund' (VGF) mandated health insurance for all Nigerians under the Bill. The VGF aims to provide coverage to more than 83 million Nigerians who cannot afford premiums.

There is also a crucial requirement for continued public health education to ensure that inhabitants are aware of the availability of health insurance since the demand creation will be vital to adopting of mandated health insurance.

### Ensure Accountability and Corruption Resilience

Nigeria will not be able to achieve universal healthcare if the system is corrupt. Absenteeism, procurement-related corruption, under-the-counter payments, health finance-related corruption, and employment-related corruption are prevalent forms of corruption in the Nigerian health system. Corruption must be eradicated from the country to achieve decent progress toward health goals.

The health sector's public financial management systems must be upgraded to promote accountability, transparency, and efficiency while decreasing corruption. Governments will ensure that the expenditure-tracking mechanisms are established and routinely used at all levels of authority.

### Maternal, Neonatal, and Child Mortality in Nigeria - Saving Millions of Lives

Despite recent advances, Nigeria's rate of maternal, neonatal, and infant fatalities remains extraordinarily high, placing a significant health and economic burden on the community putting Nigeria off the pace to reach sustainable development objectives. One of the major causes of the low quality of maternity and child healthcare services is recognised as a lack of continual training of maternal and child healthcare practitioners.

### Finance the Health System - Sources of Funds and Their Deficiencies

Health finance reform is required if Nigeria's health system wants to offer universal health coverage to its people.

Reforms must prioritise government healthcare funds and improve resource management through strategic purchases. It should also elevate the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) law to necessitate mandatory insurance coverage with an updated and comprehensive benefits package. Implementation barriers must also be addressed to improve financial risk protection and the effectiveness of health fund systems, namely social health insurance in Nigeria.

### Revenue Management and Insurance Systems

Revenue Management and insurance systems are used to manage income and decrease the load on impoverished Nigerians. To expedite progress towards universal health coverage, state and local government's plan to construct a tax-based health finance system aimed at vulnerable groups, the poorest groups, and persons operational in the informal sector of the economy. Health insurance schemes in Ghana and Anambra State will help to analyse prospective ways to extend health insurance coverage among informal sector workers.



### **Increase Efficiency through Strategic Health Purchase**

Strategic health purchase ensures that only necessary services are acquired to find the most cost-effective ones with proof of excellent value for money. It guarantees to achieve health-related SDG objectives, universal health coverage, and other national priorities. The strategic purchase aims to improve equality in resource allocation, boost efficiency (more health for less money), manage expenses growth, and promote quality in healthcare delivery.

The government must extend the Social Health Insurance Program (SHIP), reduce out-of-pocket health expenditure (OOPE), and attain UHC in Nigeria. This will enhance the efficiency of the NHIS and the whole health system. The government should also take into consideration the below points.

### **Conduct Health Workforce Skills Gap Analysis**

NHIS recognises the need to scale up the combination of skills and distribution of workers. The primary step is to undertake HR diagnostics of skill gaps within the NHIS to help characterise the necessary abilities and competencies. It will establish a framework to hire and disperse administrative and executive employees at all levels of the scheme/organisation.

## **Current Considerations of Policymakers to Boost Nigeria's HRH to Accomplish UHC**

### **Strengthen Healthcare Administrative and Executive Positions**

Identify the best professionals who can be promoted in healthcare administration and create succession plans for administrative/top management positions to make more staff available for deployment into executive/middle management positions. One of UHC's most definite measures of success is the expansion of SHIP into Nigeria's hinterlands. There is also a need to prevent the continual mass emigration of Nigerian physicians, nurses, and other health professionals to raise health budgetary expenditures and improve healthcare workers' welfare and work circumstances.

### **Employ language and communication experts**

Language and public communication professionals are crucial for effective public interactions. This will help many linguistic mediums and channels to massively educate the public about SHIP and the responsibilities of HRH at their disposal.

### **Promote synergy of HRH across health organisations**

There is a need to develop technical management forums that increase synergy in the Provider-HMO-NHIS system in Nigeria to improve HRH synergy. Each state must host an annual Provider-HMO-NHIS conference to discuss and resolve issues related to HRH's compliance and maintenance of quality standards.

The conference intends to enhance and deliver 30 days maximum payment of claims to healthcare providers, increase responsiveness to health consumer needs, and strengthen the supervisory level of SHIP across health organisations, zones, and states.





## Recent Developments

### **Parkers Mobile Clinic seeks partners for “Parkers USSD”**

Parkers Mobile Clinic, a health organisation which strengthens healthcare services delivery for vulnerable population in Southern Nigeria through Partnerships with international NGOs, government and innovative health delivery models, is looking for a partner to invest in a health system strengthening project in Southern Nigeria that will involve rehabilitating health centres and using digital health to enhance health systems.

### **Community Oriented DMPA-SC/Self-Injection Acceleration in Nigeria (CODSAiN) and Self-Care Accelerator Project (S-CAP) launched**

The Community Oriented DMPA-SC/Self-Injection Acceleration in Nigeria (CODSAiN) and Self-Care Accelerator Project (S-CAP) have been launched in accordance with the Federal Government of Nigeria's Family Planning (FP) 2030 program.

### **Forcardio App**

Forcardio is an all-in-one cardiovascular monitoring tool that uses AI and conventional community screening to detect cardiovascular illnesses. It is a fun and engaging digital solution that helps students and pupils in primary and secondary schools aged 5-17 (and their educators) learn about healthy habits and cardiovascular health, screen students for BMI, and engage in fun workouts/physical activities to improve heart health.

### **NHIA Partners with SFH to Speed up Universal Health Coverage**

The Society for Family Health (SFH) Nigeria has inked an agreement with the National Health Insurance Authority (NHIA) to accelerate Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in the country. The MoU covers technical assistance and capacity building

in areas such as creative finance, benefit packages, strategic plan execution, and social marketing to promote access to medications, among other common interests.

### **Chatham House Promises Aid to Nigeria**

Chatham House, a world-leading policy institute with a mission to help governments and societies build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world, has expressed its willingness to cooperate and collaborate with the Nigerian government in order to achieve the much-desired Universal Health Coverage, which will allow individuals to access healthcare without financial burden.

## Conclusion

There are challenges in achieving universal access to healthcare services, particularly in distant and neglected regions in West Africa, especially Nigeria. However, due to rapid technological innovation and the widespread usage of mobile phones, there is a possibility of using digital health solutions to bridge these gaps and give communities access to crucial healthcare services. Digitalisation is transformative opportunities in redefining the global economy, promoting financial inclusion, reducing knowledge gaps, and altering working, living, and learning environments. As a result, digitalisation will be critical for alleviating poverty and increasing shared prosperity in West Africa.



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