

The New Africa Digital Health Deal

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Dear Editors,

I am pleased to submit this letter summarizing key outcomes and highlights from the second edition of the Africa HealthTech Summit held in Kigali, Rwanda, from October 17-19, 2023.

The summit was co-located with the Mobile World Congress following an agreement between the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) and GSMA, a global organization unifying the mobile ecosystem¹ to work together in realizing some of the biggest opportunities to attain universal health coverage, including rolling out digital infrastructure, promoting home-grown HealthTech innovation, and providing thought leadership and convening platforms for effective collaboration between the public health and technology sectors in Africa.

The summit brought together over 1000 delegates from across the continent and beyond to discuss strategies for accelerating digital health transformation.

The opening keynote by His Excellency Dr. Jean Kaseya, Africa CDC Director General, and Dr. Sabin Nsanzimana, Minister of Health, Republic of Rwanda, focused on the New Africa Digital Health Deal and the critical role of digital innovation in strengthening health security on the continent. Africa CDC aims to become a digitally-savvy institution by 2030, with efficient and

intelligent operations to support Member States in building accessible, affordable, high-quality digital health systems for universal health coverage and stronger pandemic preparedness, prevention, and response capabilities. Flagship initiatives include connecting 100,000 health facilities and 2 million community health workers to the internet, championing a paperless primary care system, enhancing diagnostics, optimizing surveillance, integrating One Health data, improving supply chains, developing workforce capacity, expanding women's leadership, enabling innovations, accelerating country's progress towards more mature digital health ecosystems, leading health data governance, and convening multi-stakeholder networks for stronger scalability and sustainability of digital health innovation.

The speakers emphasized the need for African nations to take ownership in driving digital transformations that address local health priorities and build more resilient systems.² There was strong agreement on the central role of communities and citizens in co-creating people-centered digital health solutions designed to enhance pandemic preparedness, prevention, and response.³

Multiple sessions provided in-depth explorations of how artificial intelligence and machine learning can support real-time surveillance, contact tracing, predictive modeling, and personalized care.⁴ However, responsible development and use of these technologies were urged, including mitigating risks of bias and ensuring transparency and explainability.⁵ Extensive discussions also focused on the immense potential of digital tools to transform primary care as the foundation of resilient health systems. Innovations like virtual consultations and digitized community health worker programs can expand access to care, reduce costs, and empower local care teams.⁶

One Health approach was a prominent theme across several panels, showcasing how digital capabilities can enable integrated surveillance and coordinated responses across human, animal, and environmental health.⁷ This is especially critical in Africa, which bears over 60% of the global burden of infectious diseases, many of which are zoonoses like Ebola, Rift Valley Fever, and, more recently COVID-19. Advanced digital tools can strengthen real-time data integration, analysis, and sharing for prompt risk assessment and actions across sectors.⁸

Women's leadership and empowerment in digital health were highlighted in a high-level panel focused on increasing women's participation as innovators, decision-makers, and users.⁹ Youths were also recognized as vital change agents and co-creators, and an African Youth in Digital Health Ministerial Breakfast was included. Leaders present committed to supporting youth initiatives that include the organization of innovation challenges, training, and leadership development programs to increase the participation of youth in strengthening health systems.

One key announcement was the launch of HealthConnekt Africa, which aims to connect 100,000 health facilities to the internet and provide 2 million community health workers with smart devices by 2030. This will enable access to virtual training, data systems, diagnostics, and more.

The Africa Digital Health Index was unveiled as a tool to benchmark countries' digital health maturity and guide investments. The Africa Digital Health Networks was also launched as an umbrella body and marketplace to connect communities of practice across academia, civil society, government, and the private sector to drive progress.

The Summit gathered influential stakeholders across Africa and globally to reignite momentum and collective action towards people-centred, innovative, locally-driven digital health transformation. It underscored the hard work required to harness technologies responsibly to uphold human rights, expand access, save lives, create opportunities, and strengthen systems' pandemic preparedness, prevention and response capabilities.

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I look forward to continued engagement to share lessons and evidence as this vital work advances. The Summit represented a historic inflexion point in realizing the immense promise of digital health in Africa, but only through collaborative, ethical, and inclusive implementation centered on human dignity.

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