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USAID DIGITAL LITERACY SECTORAL BRIEFS

Global Health

Digital Literacy¹ and Global Health

Digital literacy is essential to sustaining a quickly evolving digital health² landscape, especially as digital adoption and innovation accelerate in the health sector. The ability of stakeholders at all levels—ranging from clients to health policymakers—to understand and use digital tools will determine the degree to which these new tools are adopted and how quickly they scale across the health sector.

What is Digital Literacy?

USAID—building on UNESCO's definition of the term—defines digital literacy as “*The ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networked technologies for participation in economic, social, and political life.*”

- ¹ Unless otherwise cited, all information in this sectoral brief comes from USAID's Digital Literacy Primer. Full citation: “Digital Literacy Primer: How to Build Digital Literacy into USAID Programming” (USAID, 2022), <https://www.usaid.gov/digital-development/digital-literacy-primer>.
- ² Digital health is “the systematic application of information and communications technologies, computer science, and data to support informed decision-making by individuals, the health workforce, and health institutions, to strengthen resilience to disease and improve health and wellness for all.”

USAID's Digital Literacy Framework

To effectively and equitably achieve digital access, USAID's approach to digital programming must extend beyond infrastructure and devices to ensure that users possess a nuanced set of skills to meaningfully, responsibly, and safely participate in digital ecosystems. Two pillars underpin USAID's definition of digital literacy: capacity and safety.

- » Capacity refers to the technical knowledge and skills required to use a variety of digital devices and services such as mobile phones; tablets and computers; the Internet; messaging and social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook; and audio and visual tools.
- » Safety refers to the skills and awareness required to use digital tools carefully while navigating potential harms and cyber threats successfully. This pillar includes, but is not limited to, strategies for strengthening cyber hygiene³ and countering mis- and disinformation.

As explained in the Digital Literacy Primer, USAID takes two primary approaches for incorporating digital literacy into program design:

- » **Foundational** digital literacy activities build digital literacy skills applicable to all aspects of users' economic, social, and personal lives—a goal in and of itself.
- » **Tactical digital** literacy activities prepare target populations to use digital tools to ensure that a specific digital intervention is effective in a particular sector (this category may also include activities that do not have digital literacy as their singular goal).

Digital Literacy in USAID's Bureau for Global Health

USAID, informed by the Agency's A Vision for Action in Digital Health and its Vision for Health System Strengthening 2030, and aligned to the World Health Organization's (WHO) Classification of Digital Health Interventions, is taking a functional approach to building digital literacy across its strategic priorities in global health:

- » **Clients.** USAID builds digital literacy for its health intervention clients. Not only do digital literacy trainings teach healthcare clients how to use digital tools to access health-related information and understand basic health data privacy principles, they also teach clients how to critically examine media messaging to counter health-related disinformation about COVID-19 and other diseases. These efforts enable clients to access and meaningfully engage with digital health initiatives.
- » **Healthcare providers.** Cultivating digital literacy among health workers is critical to achieving the Biden-Harris Administration Global Health Worker Initiative, which seeks to harness technological advancements and innovation to extend the reach of health services into local communities. To date, USAID has cultivated digital literacy skills among health



³ Cyber Hygiene is defined as the practices and steps that users of computers and other devices take to maintain system health and improve online security. These practices are often part of a routine to ensure the safety of identity and other details that could be stolen or corrupted.

workers so that they could take online courses—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic—which will quickly increase the reach of healthcare information to frontline workers. For example, as a precursor to health-related e-learning courses, a USAID-funded activity in Rwanda conducted a one-day workshop on basic smartphone functionality and safety for community health workers. After the workshop, 91 percent of the workers reported confidence in navigating smartphone features and functions, up from 12 percent before the training.

- » **Health system or resource managers.** USAID provides health system managers with training on key concepts in digital health systems management so they are able to understand the importance of digital systems' integration and use feedback loops to provide health workers with improved decision-making frameworks. These trainings cover digital literacy-related topics such as strengthening health systems through digital tools; enterprise architecture; the use of digital platforms; and digital health-related governance, policy regulations, and compliance concerns.
- » **Data services professionals.** USAID is also upskilling health workers specialized in data science and data interoperability, which will help the Biden-Harris Administration Global Health Worker Initiative achieve its goal of providing real-time data to health workers. For example, during its first year of implementation, the USAID/Ethiopia Digital Health Activity provided on-the-job training to 700 health information technicians in properly maintaining electronic medical catalogs and troubleshooting system challenges.
- » **Policymakers.** On an institutional level, USAID helps partner governments identify areas of specialized expertise that—when integrated into government capabilities—can further their digital health strategies. This kind of capacity-building support also builds partner governments' ability to identify internal competence gaps. Underscoring digital literacy activities are efforts related to change management and the long-term work of sensitizing health officials and other government representatives to the importance of digital tools.



Key Considerations

- » **For all health system actors:**

Assess their current levels of digital literacy and capacity before launching new interventions. All interventions that use digital health technologies should assess their target users' digital literacy level prior to launching. This will help identify any tactical digital literacy upskilling needs and help ensure that these technologies are appropriate for their target audience.

- » **For clients:**

Use digital literacy interventions to increase the uptake of digital health technologies. Hosting tactical digital literacy trainings and other interventions that teach clients the skills needed to use specific health-related digital tools will help increase the uptake of those tools.

Embed data privacy principles into digital literacy interventions. Understanding which parties have access to their sensitive health data—and for what purpose they have access—will build clients' trust in the digital health ecosystem and make them more likely to seek out other digital health-related tools.

» **For health workers:**

Incorporate digital skills into pre-service, in-service, and new skills development trainings. This will help better target and contextualize digital literacy interventions for health workers based on their specific job requirements and pre-existing skill levels.

Upskill community healthcare workers (CHWs) to use digital decision support platforms. This will allow them to execute the tasks that a more senior health worker would traditionally take on, freeing up those workers for other tasks.

» **For health systems or resource managers:**

Cultivate information literacy, data literacy, and problem solving skills. As partner governments adopt digital systems to manage patient data, information, and supply chain logistics, individuals involved with health planning and implementation will be required to build competencies in information and data literacy, problem solving, and similar areas.

» **For data services professionals:**

Emphasize the importance of developing new policies and workflows to manage data. Because data services professionals typically have higher levels of digital literacy, tactical digital literacy training tailored to their needs could focus on developing and institutionalizing policies required to manage a high volume of data (such as data privacy policies and strong cybersecurity protections), as well as new workflows that enable feedback loops to return contextualized information to frontline health workers.

» **For policymakers:**

Work with Ministries of Health and/or digital health ministries to identify and develop required digital competencies among their staff. This will ensure that any new digital literacy interventions target the areas of greatest need among ministry staff.

Upskill health ministries to think strategically and holistically about investments in their national digital health ecosystems. This type of digital literacy skill will allow health ministry staff to effectively monitor, govern, and guide donors and other stakeholders working in the digital health space, ensuring that any new investments align with ministry priorities.

Other Resources

[USAID's Vision for Action in Digital Health](#)

[USAID's Vision for Health System Strengthening](#)

[The Biden-Harris Administration Global Health Worker Initiative](#)

[LivingGoods' Digital Health Tools for Community Health Worker \(CHW\) Programs](#)

[GSMA's mHealth Gender Toolkit](#)

[The Role of Digital Financial Services in Accelerating USAID's Health Goals](#)

For more information, please contact digitaldevelopment@usaid.gov.



USAID'S DIGITAL STRATEGY

USAID's *Digital Strategy* was launched in April 2020 with the goal of supporting USAID partner countries through their digital transformations. It aims to improve measurable development and humanitarian assistance outcomes through the responsible use of digital technology and to strengthen the openness, inclusiveness, and security of partner country digital ecosystems.