

The Digital Health and Rights Project (DHRP) Consortium at the United Nations General Assembly 2023: Advocating for Human Rights in the Digital Age

This September, members of the DHRP attended the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on behalf of the Consortium to advocate for digital health and rights. Read on to hear more about our experience and what is coming next for digital health:

What is digital health and what are the key issues?

Digital technologies are fast becoming a key resource to improve health and wellbeing across the globe. The term captures a range of interventions including the use of digital technologies, data and AI to improve health outcomes. The WHO Digital Health Strategy 2020-2025 outlines this in more detail (see [here](#)).



The DHRP Consortium is a global collective of organisations working on digital health and human rights. We conduct research, mobilise activists and advocate on three key issues: governance of digital technologies for health, reduction of digital divides and meaningful participation of civil society and communities in digital innovation and governance.

We believe that digital technologies have the potential to be incredibly beneficial for health and wellbeing. However, our research with young people around the world has demonstrated numerous structural barriers that prevent access to, and benefit from, digital technologies for health.

These barriers include inadequate access to technologies themselves, with 2.9bn people still offline and those living in rural areas, on low incomes and with less education, particularly affected. Additionally, barriers exist in access to information and digital literacy - how to make use of the tools available in ways that are beneficial, safe and appropriate. Lastly, barriers are also apparent in the form of political determinants such as inadequate laws and policies to regulate technologies and the influence of private companies in shaping how technologies are used.

Digital Health at UNGA:

Every year, the United Nations gathers for its General Assembly. This is an opportunity to advocate for these issues and influence policy-making, with three High-Level meetings on

health held this year (on Universal Health Coverage, Pandemic Preparedness and TB). Each of these meetings produces a political declaration that governments sign onto as a demonstration of commitment to these issues. This year, [we welcomed](#) that digital technologies for health were referenced in all three declarations.

However, the references to digital health in the declarations varied. For instance, it was excellent to see human rights and privacy mentioned in the TB declaration. Further, in the Pandemic Preparedness declaration, we were pleased to see misinformation, stigma and discrimination addressed. Yet, while digital literacy is mentioned, this declaration does not acknowledge other structural barriers to digital technologies for health or intersecting issues such as gender, race and age inequities.

In contrast, the Universal Health Coverage declaration clearly highlighted the need to address structural barriers such as digital divides, *'including the safe, accessible, equitable and affordable use of digital health technologies'*. Despite the declaration outlining the need for policies, laws and regulations it would be excellent to see stronger commitments to this end. Additionally, it is essential for cross-sector dialogue on these issues rather than reliance on the often-quoted WHO Global Strategy on Digital Health 2020-2025; civil society, communities and young people must be at the table.



Molly, a DHRP member working with STOPAIDS, attended UNGA. She reported that:

“While it was excellent to see increasing reference to digital health at UNGA, it was clear that voices were missing from the table. Only four civil society representatives could speak at each High-Level Meeting, and discussions on digital health often omitted the voices of affected communities. These voices must be heard for the benefits of digital health to be recognised for all”

Overall, we were pleased that digital technologies for health were referenced in the declarations but call on governments to make stronger commitments to accessibility, privacy, governance and the integration of human rights. For more information, see STOPAIDS' overall [analysis](#) of the political declarations.

What's Next?

With the political declarations now adopted, it is important to continue to advocate for these issues at the national level to ensure governments are held accountable to their commitments.

“It is critical that governments take seriously the potential of digital technologies to improve health and wellbeing, as well as the potential harms. Taking a human rights-based approach and consulting communities and Civil Society will ensure the best outcomes for all”

- Florence Riako Anam (Co-Executive Director, GNP+)

Over the next year, the DHRP Consortium will be undertaking a research project across Kenya, Ghana, Vietnam and Colombia to understand the key issues faced by young people when using digital technologies for health. We will also continue to advocate on digital health and human rights at global, regional and national level.

“As a young person, I am excited to be part of this project. I cannot wait to see us advance human rights in the digital age and ethically engage with the youth and communities in advancing these rights and divide”

- Olendo Obondo (DHRP representative working with KELIN)

To stay up-to-date with our work follow us on X (<https://twitter.com/DigHealthRights>) or email Molly (molly-pj@stopaids.org.uk) to be added to our mailing list.