

**Concept Note**

**Ministerial side event on the use of Artificial Intelligence for Health in the Africa Region**

**Lomé, Togo**

**Date: 25 August 2022 Time: 18:15hrs to 19:45hrs Hybrid Format**

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**Background**

In June 2021, the WHO Regional Office for Africa (WHO AFRO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and partners from the Health Harmonization for African (HHA), convened an Artificial Intelligence (AI) technical workshop aimed at assessing the penetration of AI for Health and generating recommendations for the use of AI in health in the African region. The event was under the theme “***Health Status Transformation and the Role of AI for health and pandemic preparedness in the African Context****[[1]](#footnote-2)*”. This workshop was against the backdrop of the WHO global strategy on digital health[[2]](#footnote-3) and the WHO AFRO *Framework for Implementing the Global Strategy on Digital Health in The WHO African Region*[[3]](#footnote-4). The event brought together participants from Ministries of Health, Ministries of ICT, Academia, the private sector, and Non-Governmental Organizations. In the same year, WHO AFRO launched a digital health survey, which included an AI section. The survey was based on the 2015 WHO Global Observatory on eHealth. The WHO AFRO regional office also generated additional reference materials relevant to AI for health in the context of the African region.

In 2021, WHO headquarters released an AI guidance document entitled “Ethics and Governance of Artificial Intelligence for Health[[4]](#footnote-5)”. The guidance document was developed to assist WHO Member States in implementing AI for health. WHO has also developed several training programmes aimed at raising AI and its application in health, including a recent course based on the WHO guidance on Ethics and Governance of AI[[5]](#footnote-6).

It is recognized that the developed world is benefiting from more advanced analysis and use of data. Technologies like AI have the potential to offer new insights and tools to improve clinical decision-making and predictive analytics for health emergency preparedness, mitigate workforce shortages, tailor programs targeting areas of greatest need, improve forecasting of disease outbreaks, and bring efficiencies to health service delivery. Realizing the potential of digital health and AI to achieve development goals will require collaboratively addressing multiple challenges, including strengthening underlying digital infrastructure and digital health systems, working to improve data quality, responsible management and sharing of available data, and eventually trust and utilization of data to inform strategic planning.

Furthermore, the ITU and WHO, through various collaborative activities that include the [Focus Group on Artificial Intelligence for health](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-T/focusgroups/ai4h/Pages/default.aspx)[[6]](#footnote-7), aimed to establish standardized assessment frameworks that can support the evaluation of AI-based methods for health and, through joint capacity-building programmes[[7]](#footnote-8), have delivered training to enhance and strengthen digital skills for health.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an unprecedented demand for digital technology-based solutions in screening populations, tracking infections, and minimizing direct human contact. Using different technologies at every step has brought efficiencies in tracking and tracing contacts, testing, and case management, to mention but a few. Most importantly, technology has played and continues to play a vital role in protecting medical personnel by limiting direct contact with patients, disinfecting controlled environments, and disseminating public health and emergency messages through telehealth. By leveraging the use of digital technology in Africa’s health sector, different health crises can be managed better, and health care systems can be strengthened through effective and more efficient digital mechanisms.

**The African Context**

Africa is, in many ways, poised to make increased use of Digital and AI technologies due to the rapid increase of mobile phone coverage and use[[8]](#footnote-9). However, significant gaps in the digital health ecosystems of many African countries remain that need to be addressed in order to orchestrate wider utilization and adoption of these technologies[[9]](#footnote-10). Realizing the full potential of digital technology, including AI, requires strengthening the policy and the regulatory environment, system infrastructure, sustainable financing, security and workforce capacity, and diversity in the stakeholders involved in digital health and technology innovation. While it is critical that Africa is not left out of new advances, it is equally important to approach frontier technologies thoughtfully.

**The Ministerial side event on the use of Artificial intelligence in the health sector in the African countries**

Following the afore mentioned technical meeting on AI[[10]](#footnote-11), together with various knowledge generation activities on AI conducted by the WHO AFRO and the USAID, the Regional Office (WHO AFRO) and the ITU, with support from the USAID, will be convening a ministerial side event on the use of AI for health, in the context of the African region. The ministerial side event will bring together high-level government policy-makers across Africa to discuss critical policy dimensions of strengthening the health system through AI and other relevant digital solutions. The meeting will lay the foundation for responsibly developing and adopting frontier technologies such as AI in health systems in Africa. The ministerial side event will take place along the sidelines of the 72nd WHO Regional Committee for Africa[[11]](#footnote-12).

**Ministerial side event objectives**

The objectives of the ministerial side event are to:

1. Showcase AI-driven health solutions developed and implemented by the Member States in the African Region.
2. Identify concrete actions for shaping policy and enabling environments to foster digital technologies for accelerated improvements in health and related development programs.

**Ministerial side event expected outputs**

The expected outputs of the Ministerial event include:

1. Commitments from Ministers of Health, Ministers of ICT, and all stakeholders to foster an enabling environment for the use of digital technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the health sector at the national level.
2. Enhanced adoption on the use of AI and other digital technologies to transform the health sector in the African Region.

**Approach**

As frontier digital health technologies such as AI have become more relevant and essential for the health sector and beyond, for such purposes as accelerating the health-related SDGs, this ministerial round table will provide an opportunity for joint engagement and learning by all stakeholders. The round table will use materials generated from various technical meetings held on AI since June 2021, as mentioned above. The meeting will focus on validating proposed actions developed from the technical meeting on AI and the WHO AFRO digital health survey. The round table will provide a basis for outlining the future path for digital health and AI for health, including investment opportunities, in the African Region.

**Organization of the Ministerial side event on the use artificial intelligence in the health sector in the African countries**

1. **Conveners**: The Ministerial side event will be jointly organized by WHO AFRO and ITU with the support of USAID. The same event will be held in a hybrid format along the sidelines of the WHO AFRO 72 Regional Committee.
2. **Duration**: The Ministerial side event is intended to last no more than one and a half hours.
3. **Timing:** 18:15hrs to 19:45hrs GMT
4. **Location and Venue:** The Ministerial side event will be held Togo, Lomé, with a hybrid provision

**Draft Agenda (See next page)**

**Draft agenda**

**Ministerial side event on the use of Artificial Intelligence for Health in the Africa Region**

**Venue: Lomé, Togo**  **Date: 25 August 2022 Time: 18:15hrs to 19:45hrs GMT  Duration: 1.5 hours**  **Hybrid Format**

**Chair of the Ministerial Side Event: Minister of Health Togo**

**Setting**: All invited guests are seated, after taking their initial light refreshments. The moderator, Prof Joseph OKEIBUNOR, will announce the commencement of the meeting and invite the WHO AFRO Regional Director, Dr. Moeti, to open the session.

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| Time | Session Name | Session Theme | | Session Description |
| 18:15 to  18:35 | Opening session  (20 min) | MC: Dr. Joseph OKEIBUNOR  Moderated by Dr. MAKUBALO, Assistant Regional Director   1. WHO AFRO Regional Director (RD) opening remarks (8 min) 2. Chair Minister of Health Togo remarks (4 min) 3. ITU Regional Director for Africa remarks (4min) 4. Minister of Finance -Togo remarks (4 min) 5. USAID Representative remarks (4 min) | | This session will be hosted by the WHO AFRO RD and chaired by the Minister of Health of Togo (who chaired the 71st RC session). The Chair will call upon the representatives of the main partners who participated in the organization of the ministerial side event (ITU and USAID). The speakers will present their leadership views and expectations on AI’s safe and effective use in the African region. |
| 18:35 to 18:40 | Promotional video on AI in the African Region (5 min) | MC calls for the promotional video.  Promotional video on AI in the African Region | | |
| 18:40 to 18:55 | AI technological environment in the African region and the opportunities it offers in the fight against covid-19 (15 min) | **MC calls for the technical briefing.**  **Technical Briefing**  Moderated by Caroline GAJU, International Telecommunication Union   1. Mr. Housseynou BA, WHO AFRO Digital Health Focal Point 2. Mr. Derrick MUNEENE, WHO HQ, Unit Head, Capacity Building and Collaboration, Geneva | | This will be a moderated session where the outcomes of the AI technical workshop jointly delivered in June 2021 by WHO and ITU with support from USAID will be presented. The results from the digital health survey conducted by WHO AFRO will also be discussed and presented, focusing on the AI components of the study, including discussions on WHO’s work on AI. |
| 18.55 to 19:39 | Ministerial statements and open discussion (44 min) | | MC calls for the ARD to moderate the ministerial interaction.  Moderated by Dr. MAKUBALO, Assistant Regional Director   1. Interventions from Ministers of Health: Republic of Malawi, Cape Verde (5 min for each Health Minister) 2. Interventions from Minister of ICT of Togo (5 min) 3. Interventions from Ministers of ICT: Republic of Congo, Cape Verde (5 min for each Minister) through hybrid connection | This session will lead to an open discussion with selected Ministers, asking them to give fire starter interventions on the subject. Also, share experiences from their countries on the use of digital technologies such as AI for Health. |
| 19.39  to  19:45 | Closing session  (6 min) | | MC calls for the RD and Minister of Health Togo to close the meeting.   1. WHO AFRO RD (3 min) 2. Minister of Health of Togo (3 min) | This session will include a vote of thanks and closing remarks. It will also highlight the following steps, including opportunities for WHO and ITU (with support from USAID) to advance digital health at the national and regional levels. |
| 19.45 | Serving of Dinner | | | |

1. <https://www.afro.who.int/media-centre/events/virtual-workshop-data-revolution> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/documents/gs4dhdaa2a9f352b0445bafbc79ca799dce4d.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.afro.who.int/sites/default/files/2021-07/AFR-RC71-10%20Framework%20for%20implementing%20the%20Global%20strategy%20on%20digital%20health%20in%20the%20WHO%20African%20Region.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240029200> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. <https://openwho.org/courses/ethics-ai> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-T/focusgroups/ai4h/Pages/default.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. https://academy.itu.int/training-courses/full-catalogue/who-itu-digital-health-leadership-training [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/blog/the-state-of-mobile-internet-connectivity-in-sub-saharan-africa/#:~:text=The%20mix%20of%20mobile%20connections,access%20to%20a%204G%20network>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241511780> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. <https://www.afro.who.int/media-centre/events/virtual-workshop-data-revolution> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. <https://www.afro.who.int/about-us/governance#:~:text=The%20Seventy%2Dsecond%20session%20of,participants%20with%20the%20invitation%20letters>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)