



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
6 November 2020

English only

Commission for Social Development

Fifty-ninth session

8–17 February 2021

**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:**

**Priority Theme: Socially just transition towards sustainable
development: the role of digital technologies on social
development and well-being of all**

Statement submitted by Fondation d'entreprise Sanofi Espoir, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Digital technologies represent a major innovation of the last few decades; they have transformed lifestyles and human relationships to time and space and are revolutionizing the health of populations. The Sanofi Espoir Foundation is exploring various ways to appropriate these technologies and would like to share its experience with the Commission for Social Development, particularly in one of its major focus areas: maternal and child health.

In response to the current context of a globalized and rapidly changing healthcare system, professionals are developing and accessing more interdisciplinary knowledge. Based on the observation that “Massive Open Online Courses” (MOOCs) can offer a relevant solution to meet the educational challenges of sub-Saharan African countries, the Sanofi Espoir Foundation has sponsored a study prior to producing digital teaching materials in maternal and child health.

This study has demonstrated that the combined stimulus of the Internet, globalization, and the constant urgent message of the international agenda (International Monetary Fund, World Bank) in Africa is driving the continent’s new dynamic towards distance education, using information and communication technologies (ICT) in general but also Open Online Training for All.

However, due to the continuing digital divide, the population is turning to innovations in digital education, mainly in the field of continuing education and consolidating learning and professional achievements.

The study also qualified the idea that information and communication technologies act as “generic” technologies, i.e. usable by everyone and everywhere in Africa. Even if massive investments in the telecommunications infrastructure have enabled the development of efficient mobile networks and high-speed Internet, access to them requires personal financing for the population. This can be problematic in the underprivileged strata where internet packages are sold at a high price for poor quality bandwidth. Still today there are many areas with no connection, others that have only irregular access to the Internet at a high cost, and highly connected areas with low-cost access. The same phenomenon can be observed in several other developing countries in South America and Asia.

In spite of this difficult and diverse situation on the ground, tremendous advances have been achieved. Mobile telephony has proved essential for accessing digital resources. The so-called ‘technical’ digital divide is difficult to overcome and is beyond the reach of healthcare actors. However, the capacity to access content, embrace new concepts, and adapt them to the local environment and culture has largely contributed to reducing the digital divide in training, particularly for midwives.

This is what we have learned from the experience of the Women Observatory for eHealth (WeObservatory) from the Millennia2025 Women and Innovation Foundation, supported by the Sanofi Espoir Foundation. This online women’s health observatory promotes collaboration and innovation in midwifery practice projects and provides technical assistance and support for innovative ideas. The projects that have emerged here come from midwives all over the world - Africa, Asia, and the Americas – with support structures often located in Europe. We shall describe two of them here which demonstrate the diversity of concepts and approaches for developing midwives’ skills through information and communication technologies.

The first example is the San Miguel de Allende Center for Adolescents (CASA Association) in Mexico, which has developed “Information and Communication technologies for Midwives”, an e-learning program targeting a receptive population

to augment the digital skills of young indigenous midwifery students. These were introduced to the use of an e-learning platform, and reliable digital resources were made available. They could access courses to familiarize themselves with the use of electronic health (e-Health) or mobile health (m-Health) applications, and the use of telemedicine in the field of maternal and neonatal health.

To extend access to this education to areas with poor network coverage, the content of the e-book was stored on Universal Serial Bus memory sticks, providing other students with direct access to offline educational materials.

An evaluation survey of this experience showed how important it was for the participants' digital skills development. The e-learning platform enabled both individualized and personalized learning together with rich interdisciplinary exchanges among the health personnel of midwives, nurses, and doctors. The online platform is now considered an effective tool for professional advancement, encouraging efficient interactions and a more collaborative approach. By promoting digital literacy among midwives, their vital role has gained greater recognition among other health professionals. The success of this online training has been recognized by being integrated into the virtual campus of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), enabling the regional extension of skills development.

The second project focuses on improving the way midwives interact with expectant mothers. It promotes the idea that communication and knowledge of cultural context are essential skills that have a strong impact on the quality of services that midwives provide to expectant mothers. The Sanofi Espoir Foundation, through WeObservatory, has supported the development of digital tools that facilitate the sharing of prenatal information with expectant mothers from different cultural backgrounds, thereby raising cultural competence to the same level as technical competence. For example, in Switzerland, the midwives of the PanMilar Association offer pregnancy advice and perinatal preparation courses in the mother tongues of pregnant migrant women living in the canton of Vaud. Experienced intercultural translators help the midwives engage in conversation on perinatal topics and apply practical exercises that factor in the entire migratory, linguistic, and cultural context. By speaking their own language, expectant mothers share the traditions of their country of origin and/or their personal experience of childbirth while at the same time learning what it is like to be a mother living in Switzerland.

To improve women's access to prenatal services, short videos have been produced to replace the organization's brochures, and a new website, with information in 39 languages on services and activities available for pregnant women, provides input for migrant women and midwives. The site has been so successful that it is consulted by visitors from 42 countries.

The Sanofi Espoir Foundation is supporting numerous projects to encourage the use of information and communication technologies as a tool for improving mother and child health, and we have only presented a selection here. The Commission for Social Development provides us with a forum to share how these technologies can be used to bring innovation, capacity building, communication, and multiple forms of collaboration between midwives from different countries and patients from diverse backgrounds.

Like many other e-health projects, these two had to overcome infrastructural and technical barriers, limited financial and human resources, and cultural differences. The midwives' professionalism and enthusiasm largely compensated for these difficulties.

Our conclusion in three points:

1. Digital health in the developing world is making care more accessible to people living in areas far from health facilities. For these remote regions or in those where health professionals need to cover large areas, but where a mobile signal can be found, examinations and tests can be performed and interpreted using these technologies.
 2. Knowledge can also travel much faster thanks to information and communication technologies. A digital communication platform with health resources for professionals and patients in developing countries can increase the chances of survival.
 3. Improving the health of people in the developing world depends on rolling out a variety of health innovations: new medicines, vaccines, medical devices, diagnostic tools, and more. In addition, creative and innovative medical solutions in information and communication technologies have an enormous potential that should be further developed.
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