



POLICY BRIEF

Healthy digital transformations

A call to G20 leaders to build health systems and digital environments that support better health and well-being for young people

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KEY MESSAGES

The G20 has a unique opportunity to address the digital determinants of young people's health and well-being. To do so, it must overcome a siloed approach to health, education and digitalization and strengthen multisectoral investments in young people's digital health futures.

High potential priority actions include:

- Enacting public health strategies and stronger digital governance to **create safe and healthy digital environments**, with a special focus on promoting young people's health and well-being online.
- **Involving young people and marginalized groups** in the co-creation of digital first health systems and digital health governance.

We urge G20 leaders, when they convene this year in Brazil and next year in South Africa, to establish an initiative to build digital environments that support equitable health outcomes for all young people.

Digital transformations: a benefit and risk to young people’s health and well-being

Almost one-third of people in the G20—over 2.5 billion people—are aged between 0 and 24 (See Table 1). Five G20 members—India, China, Indonesia, USA and Brazil—rank among the countries with the largest populations of young people in the world. (UNDESA, 2024)

Investing in young people’s health is necessary to promote their lifelong health and accelerate progress towards universal health coverage. (WHO, 2019)

Improving young people’s health and well-being is also critical for a nation’s overall socioeconomic development. (Sheehan et al., 2017) Digital transformations present a major opportunity to realize the right to health for everyone, and strengthen health systems to become more responsive to current and future health priorities.

Table 1. Populations aged 0–24 across the G20 in 2024 Source: UNDESA, 2024

Country	Population aged under 25 (thousands)	Proportion of the population aged under 25
African Union	889,058	58.8
Argentina	16,893	37
Australia	8,002	30.0
Brazil	72,297	34.1
Canada	10,629	26.7
China	389,744	27.5
European Union	112,662	25.5
France	19,184	28.8
Germany	19,823	23.4
India	614,644	42.4
Indonesia	114,999	40.6
Italy	12,986	21.9
Japan	25,898	20.9
Korea (Republic of)	10,607	20.5
Mexico	54,302	41.5
Russia	40,219	27.8
Saudi Arabia	13,111	38.6
South Africa	27,030	42.2
Türkiye	31,613	36.1
United Kingdom	19,965	28.9
United States	105,254	30.5
G20 total*	2,529,897	32.5

*Totals do not double count G20 members of the AU (South Africa) or EU (France, Germany, Italy)

Digital tools including AI are enabling health systems to be reimaged, helping to close health workforce gaps and empowering providers to deliver better, timely care. Divides in digital access and literacy must therefore be addressed to enable all young people to fully benefit from digital first health systems and the growing range of digital health solutions.

Beyond the health system, digital devices and platforms can be used to access a range of services, information and networks that support health and well-being. Digital environments offer a safe and confidential space for many

young people to seek health advice and connect with peers who share similar health concerns. But young digital technology users are also being exposed to a range of risks which can undermine their physical and mental health, development and well-being. (Holly et al, 2023; Amenyah et al, 2024)

The activities of digital technology companies extend beyond borders, as does the impact of their products and services. Coordinated action across the G20 is needed to ensure that digital transformations support young people's rights and contribute to the highest possible standard of health and well-being for all.

Youth, health and digitalization: moving from siloed discussions to multisectoral action

Governments are facing the dual challenge of ensuring that all people can benefit from the positive and health promoting aspects of digital transformations while protecting them from harms associated with technology use.

While digital health falls within the remit of health ministries, the governance of digital technologies, data and AI is primarily the responsibility of other sectors such as science, innovation and technology. As a result, digital governance initiatives often fail to adequately consider all of the positive and negative impacts of digitalization on the health and well-being of individuals and communities.

Simultaneously, digital health initiatives seldom consider the broader health-related harms associated with digital transformations.

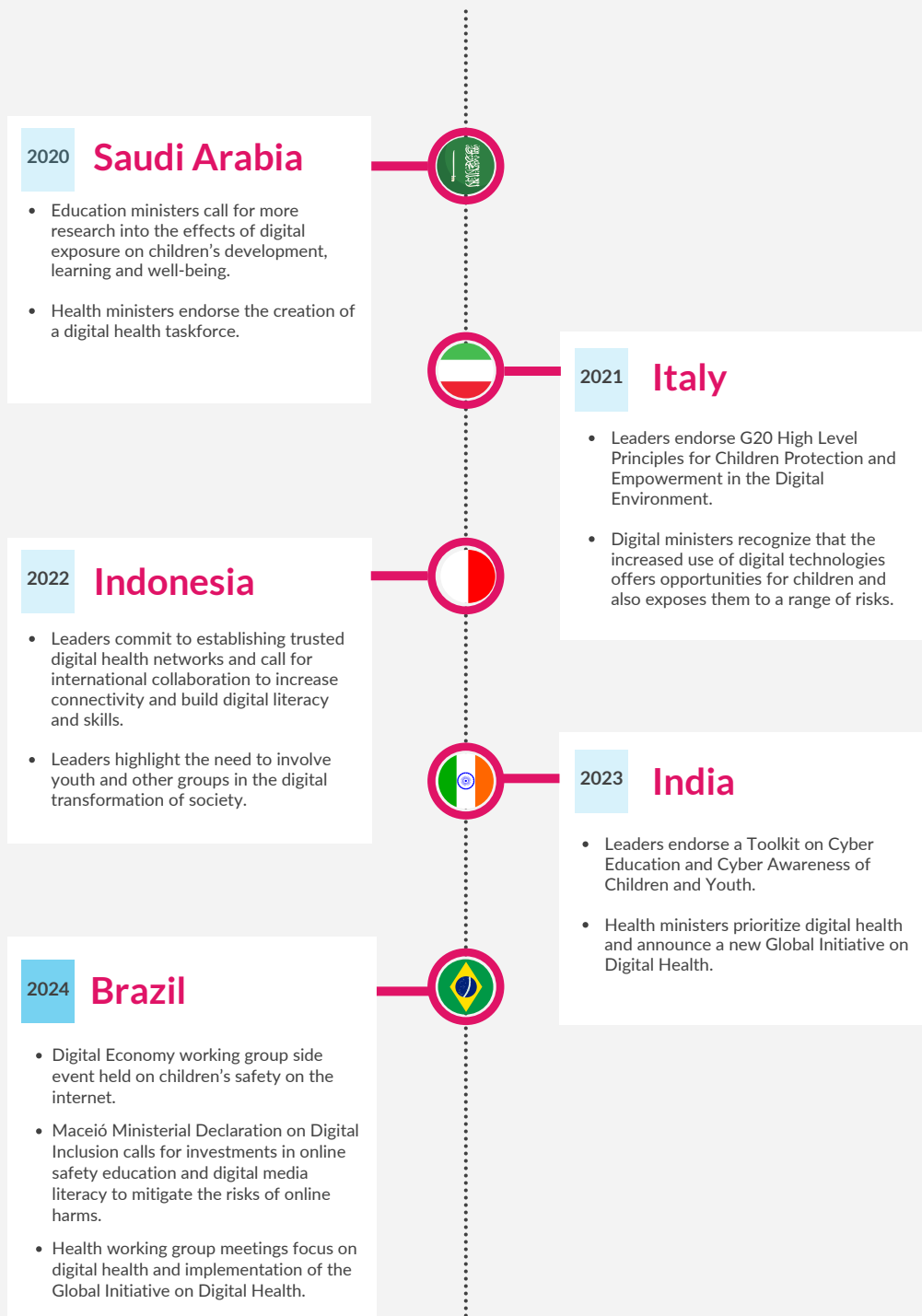
Recent G20 presidencies have identified health, digitalization and investing in youth as priorities with several initiatives introduced to take these agendas forward (see box below). However, these three intersecting issues have yet to be addressed by the G20 comprehensively.

DTH-Lab's analysis of G20 outcome documents indicates that a health focus is missing in digital economy-related discussions and initiatives around digital governance, child protection and online safety.

G20 discussions and initiatives on digital health have not considered the wider impacts of digitalization or digital environments on health and well-being, including for young people. The importance of involving young people in the design and governance of digital health is not reflected in any G20 outcome documents.

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Figure 1. Supporting healthy digital environments: highlights from recent G20 summits



The disconnect between initiatives on digital health and tackling digital harms is also evidenced at the national level. DTH-Lab's ongoing review of national digital health strategies has shown that while digital health strategies highlight the opportunities of digitalization for improving health and reducing inequalities, they do not consider or include actions to address health-related harms associated with digital transformations taking place beyond the health sector. (Haroon, 2024)

Improving young people's health and well-being is rarely articulated as an objective in digital health strategies and the importance of involving young people in digital health governance is not

discussed. Table 2 below provides a high-level overview of DTH-Lab's analysis for six G20 countries with large youth populations.

DTH-Lab is also conducting a global mapping and analysis of policies and regulations designed to protect children and adolescents from online harms. Findings emerging from this work suggest that although many documents acknowledge the connection between online risks and children's well-being, specific health-related consequences are rarely detailed and health ministries are not often involved in the policy development process. (Lopez et al., 2024)

Table 2. Thematic analysis of national digital health strategies

Source: Haroon, 2024

Country Strategies reviewed	Does the strategy reference improving young people's health & well-being as an expected outcome?	Does the strategy promote young people's involvement in digital health governance?	Does the strategy highlight positive benefits of digitalization for health?	Does the strategy highlight negative impacts of digitalization for health?
Brazil Brazilian National Digital Health Strategy (2020)	No	No	Yes	No
China Healthy China 2030 (2016) National Health Informatization Development Plan (2018-2025)	Yes	No	Yes	No
India National Digital Health Mission (2020) National Digital Health Blueprint (2019) National Health Stack (2018)	Yes	No	Yes	No
Indonesia Digital Transformation Strategy for Health (2020)	No	No	Yes	No
South Africa National Digital Health Strategy for South Africa (2019)	Yes	No	Yes	No
USA Federal Health IT Strategic Plan (2020)	No	No	Yes	No

Healthy digital transformations for young people: ways forward

As highlighted in a recent T20 policy brief, addressing the health consequences associated with digital transformations is critical to safeguard child well-being as well as for broader economic, public health and future societal outcomes. The health benefits of digital transformations will not be realized unless stakeholders from different sectors and geographies work together to close digital divides, scale up effective digital health solutions, address digital harms, and create safe and health-promoting digital environments.

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Priority area 1. Take a holistic approach to addressing the digital determinants of health

Many of the health-related impacts of digital transformations—known collectively as the digital determinants of health—are taking place outside of the formal health sector and therefore require multisectoral collaboration and action (see Figure 1). To effectively address digital determinants, the current disconnect between health governance and digital governance must be bridged.

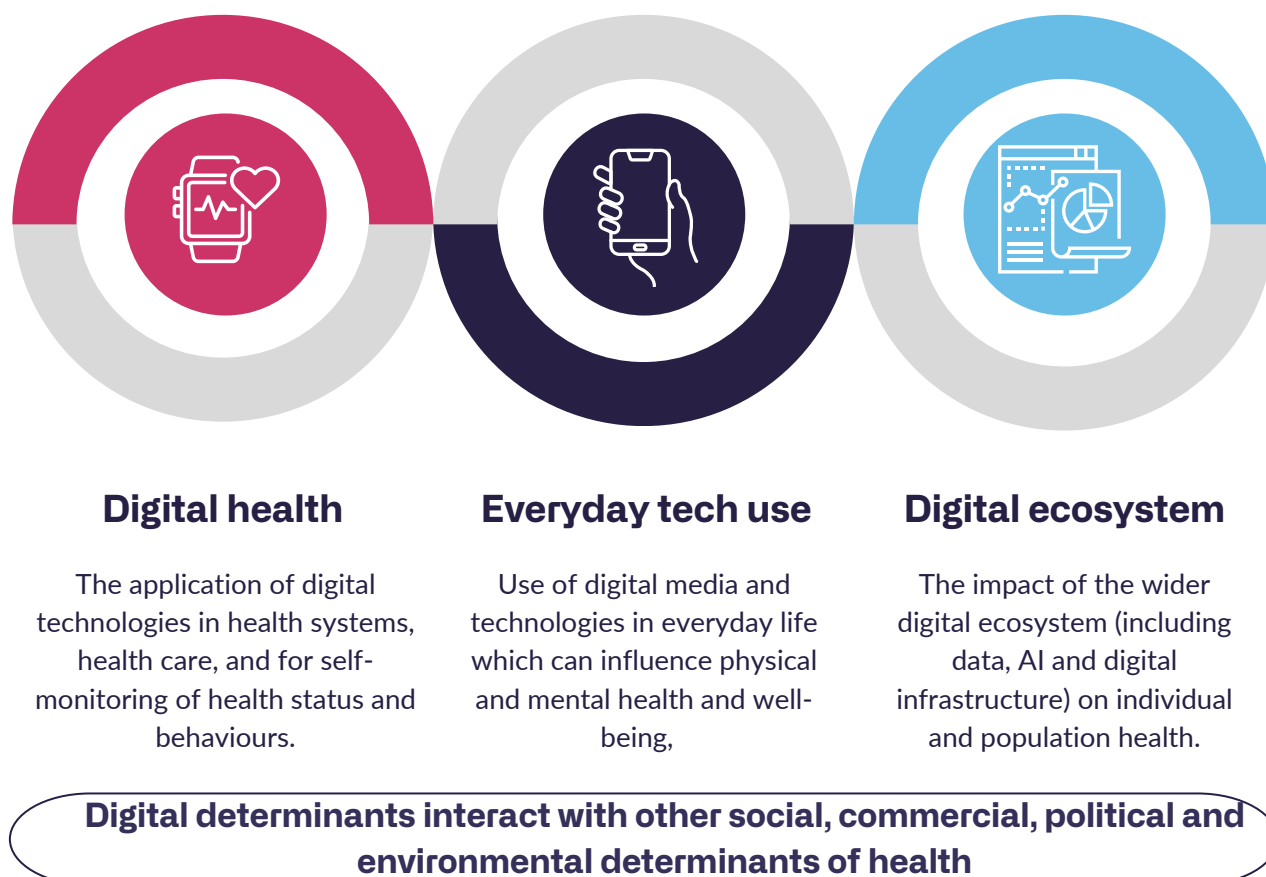
The digital determinants of health provide G20 policymakers with a more holistic lens through which look at health-related issues of digital transformations, considering all the challenges and opportunities presented by digitalization for young people's health and well-being and for societies overall.

A shared commitment to addressing the digital determinants across the G20 would help to

establish health and well-being as a central consideration in efforts to strengthen digital and data governance. It would also give a strong mandate to health actors to enact a public health response to the opportunities and challenges of the broader digital transformation process alongside efforts to expand the benefits of digital health solutions.

The G20 can call upon international organizations such as the World Health Organization to facilitate high-level political discussions on the digital determinants of health and develop guidance for Member States on how to address them. The G20 could also recommend that the World Bank and other international donors reorient their lending and policy advisory activities towards addressing the digital determinants of health.

Figure 2. The digital determinants of health



Priority area 2. Involve young people and marginalized groups in health and digital governance

Despite critical inequities in their digital skills and access, young people are keen adopters of digital technologies and are already using them to support their health and well-being. (Governing Health Futures 2030, 2021) Yet, initiatives to digitally transform health systems often fail to consider young people as co-creators and users. Across the globe, adolescents and young adults have voiced concerns about being sidelined in policymaking processes related to both health and digital transformations, leading to distrust in data practices and the application of digital health technologies. (Wong et al., 2021)

As a result, health system reforms and digital health tools are not sufficiently geared towards meeting young people's current or future needs and are failing to protect them from digital harms. (Kickbush et al., 2021) The exclusion of youth from the development of digital first health systems presents a significant challenge in ensuring their effectiveness and inclusivity. (Digital Transformations for Health Lab, 2024) It also undermines their right to participate in decision-making processes that impact their lives.

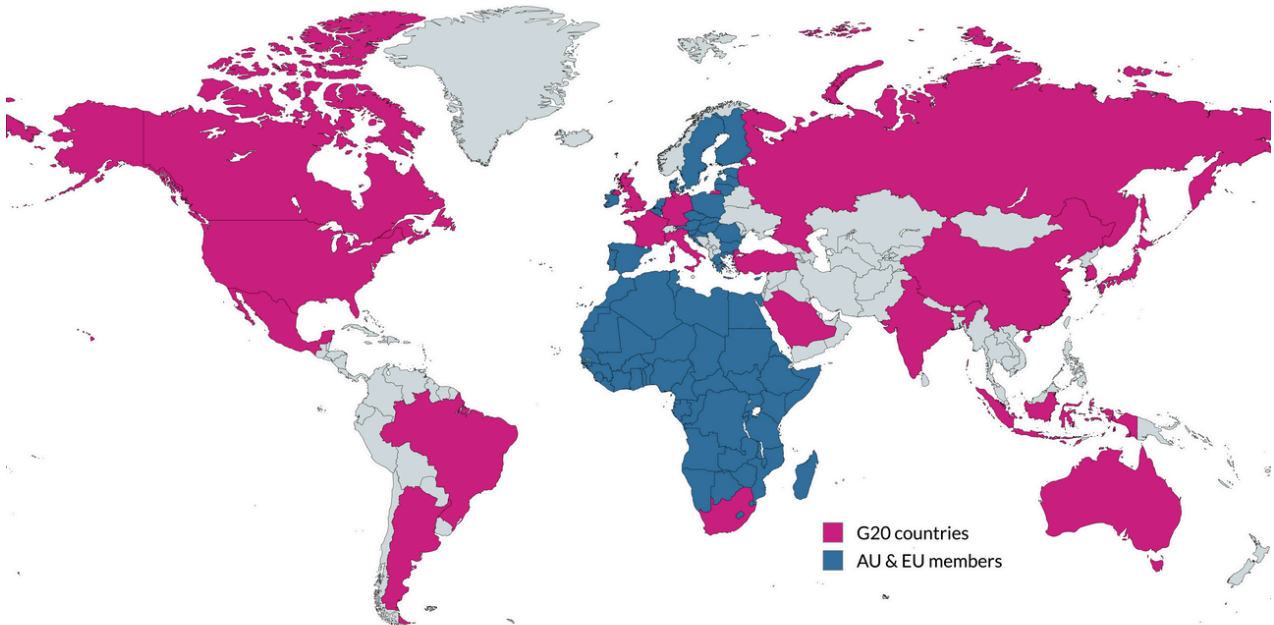
In the recently adopted Pact for the Future, UN Member States resolved to strengthen the meaningful participation of young people in both national and global policymaking and decision-making processes. (United Nations, 2024) The importance of including and institutionalizing youth participation in both digital and non-digital health programmes is being recognized by policymakers. For example, WHO guidance on youth-centred digital health interventions recommends the meaningful and sustainable involvement of young people at every stage of the design and implementation process. (World Health Organization, 2021)

Young people are eager to see such recommendations put into practice. In a recent declaration, the WHO's Youth Council has called for greater involvement in decision-making on health matters and for investment in their education, skills and leadership opportunities. They also want to see more young people empowered to play a role co-creating healthy environments, including safe and healthy online spaces. (WHO Youth Council, 2024)

A clear statement from the G20 on the importance of meaningfully engaging young people in the co-creation of digital first health systems and in strengthening digital health governance would send a powerful message to policymakers and tech companies to invest in a new generation of digital health citizens.

From Rio to South Africa: an opportunity to build digital first health systems and digital environments that effectively support young people's health and well-being

Figure 3. 77% of the world's young people under 25 live in the G20 region



Over three-quarters of the world's young people aged 0 to 24 years live in the 19 countries and two regional groups that make up the G20. (UNDESA, 2024) Global and multisectoral action is urgently required to build digital first health systems and digital environments that effectively support young people's health and well-being. Although G20 discussions on digital health, digital governance and youth engagement have so far been conducted in parallel, the Rio Summit presents an opportunity for G20 Leaders to connect the dots and signal their intention to take a more holistic approach to digital health transformations in the future.

As Brazil's presidency culminates and South Africa prepares to take the baton, the G20 has a unique opportunity to promote young people's health and well-being by making digital determinants of health and greater involvement of young people in digital health governance priorities for 2025.

By investing in young people's digital health futures and making both health and digital governance more participatory and inclusive—with the active engagement of young people, women and marginalized or disenfranchised communities—innovations in health and other sectors can contribute to more equitable health outcomes and enable the benefits of digital transformation to be distributed more fairly.

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About DTH-Lab

DTH-Lab is a global consortium of partners working to drive implementation of The Lancet and Financial Times Commission on Governing Health Futures 2030's recommendations for value-based digital transformations for health co-created with young people. The DTH-Lab operates through a distributive governance model, led by three core partners: Ashoka University (India), DTH-Lab (hosted by the University of Geneva, Switzerland) and PharmAccess Foundation (Nigeria).

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