Digital Square Manifesto

Digital Square envisions a world where the **appropriate use of digitally-enabled health services closes the health equity gap**. In this world, individuals have the information they need to manage their own health and know when to seek professional care. Health worker shortages and medical stockouts no longer plague health systems. More efficient, higher quality service delivery allows governments and private providers to affordably extend health insurance coverage to everyone, so families are no longer mired in poverty from their health bills. And importantly, health innovations no longer take 20 or more years to cascade from the earliest adopters to widespread use.

Unfortunately, this world does not currently exist. While there have been extraordinary gains in health equity since the 1990s, disparities remain and are at risk of widening unless digital health interventions achieve their potential in closing the gap. Some populations live in areas with poor infrastructure, inadequate capacity to use and maintain digital health interventions, and a lack of policies and governing bodies to protect populations from misuse of digital health interventions. Even when these foundational building blocks are in place, providers of health services struggle to identify appropriate digital health interventions that meet local needs, are of high technical quality, and are affordable at scale. Many investors and service providers look for ‘silver bullet’ opportunities to leapfrog existing processes, but these opportunities tend to be risky and rarely appropriate to a resource-constrained context. As a result, the story of digital health contains failed pilots, unscalable solutions, privacy violations, and short-lived ideas, which understandably have resulted in skepticism and resistance to digital health interventions.

However, the history of digital health is not all gloomy; it also contains proven gains in health equity and service delivery improvements and the world is taking notice.

- **Individuals and communities have more control over their health**: Digital platforms democratize health insights in unprecedented ways, allowing individuals and communities to play a more prominent role in their own health. For example, two studies in Australia demonstrated improved awareness on how to prevent sexually transmitted infections and reduced risky behavior following SMS-based outreach. Additional research has revealed important opportunities to increase the agency of individuals and communities, from preventing infectious diseases to increasing health behaviors, in Vietnam, Tanzania and Zambia, South Africa and Uganda, Kenya, Cambodia, Peru, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and Ecuador.

- **Service delivery can be higher quality and more efficient**: In low-resource settings with health worker shortages and financing challenges, digital platforms improve health worker productivity, support efficient resource allocation, and standardize aspects of service delivery to ensure quality. In Tanzania, digital, de-duplicated data collection and automated reporting saves health workers 10 hours per month on average which is time that they can then spend on clinical care. Gains in service delivery efficiency and quality have also occurred in India, Bangladesh and Mali, the United States, the Dominican Republic, China, Malawi, Germany, and Ghana. Some country governments have saved millions of dollars lost to fraud by digitizing their human resource and financial systems.

Digital health must move health equity forward. The digital health community must learn from our history of mixed results and adapt for a future in which the stakes are higher. Because over time, the burden of disease will look very different in communities that benefit from digitally-enabled health systems compared to communities who are excluded. In some communities today, individuals manage their own wellness via smartphones and wearables that track critical health metrics and provide insights that help with nutrition, mental well-being and care-seeking decisions, to name a few. Health providers use robust,
individual-level information to customize care. Groundbreaking medical innovations—like cancer treatments tailored to specific genetic profiles—are transforming the way we treat disease. Without concerted effort, communities that miss out on the offerings of digitally-derived insights and approaches will fall further behind—widening gaps in quality and length of life. By learning from our history and centering on health equity, appropriate digital tools can instead help close the gap.

At Digital Square, we accelerate the development, adoption, scale, and delivery of digital health innovations in low-resource settings to address health equity globally. Join us in building a world where a person’s ability to thrive is not constrained by where they are born. Join Digital Square.

Why Digital Square?

Digital Square is a digital health marketplace—or ‘square’—where supply and demand come together to accelerate health equity through the development, adoption, scale, and delivery of digital health innovations in low- and middle-income countries. We help funders, country leaders, implementers, and global policy makers learn about high-quality, trustworthy digital health software that is appropriate for low-resource settings. Health system managers and national-level decision-makers can access opportunities to grow their digital skills and strengthen their digital procurement processes through professional networks, workshops, and certification programs. Innovators can design solutions based on clearly outlined business and technical requirements specific to under-represented communities and low-resource setting, and the financing needed to meet those requirements. Finally, Digital Square’s investors achieve a double-bottom-line on their investment—they give communities faster access to digitally-enhanced healthcare and open new markets for existing software solutions.

How do we do this? Through six approaches, we:

- **Support purposeful product and service innovation** that leads to comprehensive software solutions for low-resource contexts.
- **Promote standards, policies and guidelines (SP&G)** in all Digital Square investments; these SP&Gs are set forth by the global digital health community, the World Health Organization, and the International Telecommunications Union.
- **Uphold regional and country leadership** by incubating regional professional networks, administering certification and training programs, and increasing the visibility of regional and local leaders.
- **Catalyze country digital transformation**, first by making it easier to access products, people, (best) practices and (helpful) policies, second by working through Digital Square’s network of 40 implementing partners, many of whom support national decision-makers in digital transformation efforts.
- **Catalyze health area digital transformation**, first by supporting digital implementations that help control, eliminate and eradicate diseases that have been prioritized globally (e.g., HIV), second by partnering closely with investors interested in these priority diseases (e.g., USAID).
- **Constantly gather evidence, learn and adapt** our operating model to help the global community efficiently coordinate financing and direct investment towards impactful digital health solutions.

Who do we work with? Digital Square addresses both the supply and demand of digital health applications by working with:

- **Funders.** Digital Square serves as a broker and fiduciary agent to reduce risk, validate, and coordinate investments. Digital Square also provides visibility into digital health needs and opportunities.
- **Developers and Implementers.** Digital Square provides funding, technical assistance, investor matchmaking, and connection to investment plans and pipelines. Digital Square also supports
product and service innovation that leads to comprehensive software solutions for low-resource contexts.

- **Global policy makers.** Digital Square gathers evidence to help the global community design effective, evidence-based policies and investment decisions and efficiently coordinate financing and direct investment toward impactful digital health approaches. Digital Square promotes the standards, policies, and guidelines created by global policy makers at the World Health Organization, the International Telecommunications Union, and other normative bodies.

- **Regional and country leaders.** Digital Square upholds regional and country leadership by incubating regional professional networks, administering certification and training programs, and increasing the visibility and voice of digital health leaders from low- and middle-income countries. Digital Square also brings visibility to the unique needs of low- and middle-income countries, focusing on user stories and evidence generation.

- **Communities and health workers.** Digital Square ensures the needs of communities and health workers are visible and met. Digital Square works with champions, country leaders, and implementing partners to advance digital approaches at the service delivery level.

**Why isn’t this enough to close the health equity gap?**

It is true that by working with our partners, we are already supporting millions of people in >50 countries with stronger digital health systems. But this falls short of our dream of radically advancing health equity through the appropriate use of digital health.

True digital health transformation at a global level requires a paradigm shift. In all aspects of our current work, we are committed to building momentum for this shift. We create evidence, strengthen capacity of digital health leaders, and establish frameworks for interoperability and coordination. But we cannot make this shift without transformative thinkers and doers. Transformative thinkers and doers will help us go beyond existing market structures to change the way digital health technologies and innovations are financed and scaled. They will help us better match the pace of digital health funding and implementation to the pace of technological evolution. They will inspire renewed creativity to improve the accessibility, quality, and effectiveness of health care—utilizing digital approaches—in order to reach billions of people.

We need transformative thinkers and doers to partner with us in catalyzing a large-scale transformation of how digital health interventions support health systems in low- and middle-income countries.

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