

EVENT REPORT



Digitizing healthcare in underserved communities: A leap in Africa's development?

Berlin, October 6, 2016

BACKGROUND

Remote communities in Africa often suffer from underdeveloped public infrastructure including roads, education, healthcare systems and telecommunications. Digitization is now reaching settlements previously untouched by the technological revolution, which can secure reliable internet and digital infrastructure that helps pave the way for accessible public healthcare in underserved communities.



eHealth Africa hosted **Digitizing healthcare in underserved communities: A leap in Africa's development?**, an interactive discussion and workshop evening in Berlin on October 6, 2015. Drawing on eHealth Africa's experience digitizing public healthcare and setting up digital infrastructure in the poorest communities in West Africa, the event gave attendees practical insights into eHealth and mHealth in Africa and Germany, and an opportunity to slip into the role of a creator of digital aid solutions.

Topics included the digitization of remote communities in developing countries in comparison to industrialized countries, the effects of digital healthcare on other

sectors, and the implementation of regional and global health projects.

PANEL DISCUSSION

The event was held at **Impact Hub Berlin**, a lofty and spacious co-working space, business incubator, and social enterprise community center. **Adam Thompson, Co-Founder and Executive Director of eHealth Africa**, welcomed attendees and discussed the value of sharing experience and connecting with eHealth communities. After a short introduction by **Impact Hub's Venue & Events Manager Sophie Münzberg**, the moderator of the panel discussion, **Natalya Nepomnyashcha, Communications and Operations Coordinator of**



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eHealth Africa, introduced the expert panel for a discussion on digital health innovations. **Prof. Dr. Arno Elmer**, the Founder and Managing Director of **Innovation Health Partners**; **Dr.-Ing. Matthieu-P. Schapranow**, the Program Manager of **E-Health & Life Sciences** at the **Hasso Plattner Institute**; **Dr. med. Wilm Quentin**, a Senior Research Fellow at the **Department of Health Care Management at TU Berlin**; **Sebastian Zilch**, responsible for governmental affairs and strategic networking at the **German Association of Healthcare IT Vendors**; and **Raindolf Owusu**, the Founder and Managing Director of **OasisWebSoft** joined Adam Thompson on the expert panel.



The panel began with a discussion on the benefits and challenges of **digital healthcare solutions**, both in communities where the healthcare infrastructures are underdeveloped and in countries where the structures of the healthcare system are more established. eHealth developments such as electronic doctor-patient communication can help address **geographic or cultural challenges** that hinder access to health care. An example discussed during the panel discussion was how the potential anonymity offered by eHealth can ease apprehension seek to medical advice on sensitive issues like sexual health. Additionally, the experts acknowledged the advantages of digital **record keeping** for medical infrastructure in general, yet for healthcare

systems that face severe record keeping challenges, this improvement and innovation is critically important.

Data security in eHealth was an important topic addressed by the panel. Encouraging confidence in the reliability of data protection is a universal challenge to digitizing health systems. Barriers to digitization can be found in **government and structural resistance**, an issue that was discussed particularly in the context of Germany. Panelists discussed mobilizing support for digital healthcare, as well an alternative approach that favors bringing together those already convinced of the benefits of eHealth as opposed to trying to persuade skeptics. Panelists discussed how structural and **bureaucratic obstacles** pose a larger problem in countries like Germany where the practices and procedures of the healthcare infrastructure are well established.

Another issue facing eHealth that was discussed by panelists and experienced by both in Europe and in Africa is the challenge of **retaining qualified individuals** to work in eHealth. People with the right skillset for the field, specifically those with experience in tech and health systems, tend to migrate toward established tech industry centers, such as west coast of the United States.

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WORKSHOPS

The panel discussion was followed by two parallel interactive workshops, hosted by eHealth Africa:

Ebola Call Center Workshop (Adam Butler)

This interactive workshop dealt with outbreak response. The context of the ebola outbreak was explained to participants, followed by a discussion on the best method of collecting information about the location of infected patients and the spread of the disease. The workshop explored the project of setting up call centers and hotline infrastructure to help manage the public health crisis. The discussion was centered around how eHA's Call Center application and addressed issues related to information collection and distribution as well as the unexpected issues encountered along the way.



HAT Workshop (Lucy Chambers)

This interactive workshop allowed participants to explore the problems faced by data collectors surveying the population of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for Human African Trypanosomiasis (HAT), or sleeping sickness. Participants stepped into various roles to address relevant questions, including product manager, supervisor at the Ministry of Health in the DRC, and designer for an offline data collection application. Participants discussed the design of the SENSE HAT application, necessary design trade-offs, and assumptions about feasibility, appropriateness, and sustainability of design decisions.



RESULTS

The event brought together people from tech, public health, and development sectors to discuss the issue of digitizing healthcare. Participants experienced an interactive and open platform for discussion on the benefits and challenges of this eHealth, especially in Africa and Germany. The event facilitated a productive exchange of ideas and strategies among those with diverse experience from a variety of sectors and environments.

Pictures: Lutz Pälke