One of the many barriers facing healthcare consumers in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) is the difficulty in locating the right health services and products when needed. Individuals often spend valuable time and resources navigating a maze of health providers, searching for the right place to address their health concerns. This can result in considerable confusion, uncertainty, and delays, often leading to inadequate care and potentially resulting in poor health outcomes, eroding trust in the health system.

THE PROMISE OF DIGITAL LOCATORS

In light of expanding digital access, digital locators are emerging as promising tools to address consumers’ difficulty locating services. Much like Google Maps revolutionized navigation, digital signposting has the potential to facilitate health seeking behavior by efficiently guiding individuals to the right health services and products, optimizing their journeys, and supporting them to make better-informed decisions.

While digital locators are relatively new in LMICs, examples from Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, and Vietnam showcase how these tools have been coupled with digital interventions that provide health information to streamline access to healthcare, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in Kenya, PSI collaborated with the Ministry of Health to share updated and accurate information on COVID-19 and to digitally signpost interested consumers to COVID-19 vaccines. Additionally, a partnership with Babylon Health in Vietnam showcased the integration of AI Symptom Checker with PSI’s locator tool, demonstrating significant user engagement. In Uganda, Malawi, and Nigeria, the Delivering Innovation in Self-Care (DISC) project employed a digital campaign with a chatbot and locator tool to facilitate access to self-administered injectable contraception.

Due to their relatively recent introduction in LMICs, most digital locator tools currently offer basic functionality. However, there is significant potential for further advancement to enhance the user experience in navigating complex health systems.

POTENTIAL STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE DIGITAL LOCATOR TOOLS

Integrating additional layers of information: Beyond basic functionality, digital locators can integrate additional information, including consumer reviews, real-time product availability, waiting times, costs, insurance plans, and providers’ accreditation status. They can also integrate information on different dimensions of quality of care. This can enrich users’ experience, empowering them to make better-informed decisions about their healthcare journeys, while at the same time motivating providers to uphold quality standards to attract more clients.
Improving Health Facility Mapping: The accuracy, completeness, and granularity of Master Facility Lists (MFLs), which include essential information such as geographical locations, administrative details, facility types, and available services, are crucial in enhancing digital signposting tools. Collaborative efforts, enhanced interoperability, and advancements in geolocation technology can contribute to creating high-resolution, accurate, and complete maps of health facilities. This enables healthcare consumers to precisely locate the services they need, reducing uncertainty and saving time and resources. Additionally, adding private providers contributes to a more comprehensive health facility map, allowing access to information about the available options and locations where they can access quality, affordable health services or products in both the public and private sectors.

Creating a Conducive Environment: Digital locator tools can be integrated into a government’s broader consumer engagement strategy. Advocacy, government support and ownership, and awareness campaigns play integral roles in ensuring the successful implementation and adoption of these tools. Only with this level of integration can these tools further empower users to make better-informed health decisions.

Despite their potential, there are key challenges and considerations when deploying digital locators. With the reality of poor internet infrastructure in some regions, alternative offline or low-bandwidth solutions are critical to achieving equitable access to information. Additionally, quality assurance of the information provided on digital signposting platforms is essential; however, managing, verifying, and appropriately responding to user feedback and reports, for example, can be resource intensive. In some cases, data on public and private facilities is incomplete or outdated, requiring regular maintenance and a coordinated approach among stakeholders to maintain datasets that are accurate and relevant.

LOOKING AHEAD

As countries invest in digital infrastructure, the interest in and potential of digital locators is likely to grow rapidly. By giving consumers greater insight into product and service availability, as well as provider quality, accreditation status, fees and other key information, digital signposting can increase transparency and contribute to building consumers’ trust in the health system, which in turn can result in an improved client experience of care. However, further research and experimentation are needed to effectively address some of the key implementation challenges and explore the effectiveness of these tools in removing barriers to accessing high quality care.

JOIN US

Join us in exploring how we can enhance digital locator tools to improve access to quality services and products in LMICs. Learn more in our technical brief and tune into our podcast, all part of our HSS insight series.

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