DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM FUND
PROJECT OUTCOMES

The **Digital Ecosystem Fund (DEF)** equips USAID's operating units with catalytic resources to design and implement activities that harness emerging opportunities or support strategic initiatives to strengthen or improve digital ecosystems. Flexible by design, the DEF enables activities proposed by Missions that reflect local circumstances and needs, regardless of sector.

The DEF has completed two rounds of funding, supporting 15 activities across a total of 14 Missions in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe and Eurasia.

USAID/Bangladesh, USAID/Sahel Regional, USAID/Kenya & East Africa, and USAID/Ethiopia were among the DEF's awardees. These Missions used DEF in a variety of ways; learn more below about how each Mission supported local communities and government partners through digital ecosystem strengthening across sectors.

BANGLADESH
FIGHTING MISINFORMATION ONLINE

COVID-19 misinformation is not unique to Bangladesh. Yet—as with any digital development project—unique characteristics of the local digital ecosystem require a tailored response. The USAID/Bangladesh Mission recently completed a Digital Ecosystem Fund (DEF) project titled "Bangladesh Digital Ecosystem Activity" to enhance the COVID-19 response by rapidly strengthening the digital space to provide reliable and accurate information for the Bangladeshi public.

Working with BRAC International, the Mission created a digital data collection tool to survey individuals across Bangladesh, directly reaching half a million people across 48 districts. This information was visualized in a "Rumor Map," which describes the quantity and types of misinformation across different districts. The insights gathered from this activity are being utilized in communication campaigns to counter misinformation on COVID-19 and provide credible sources of information to the public.

While many pieces of misinformation were consistent across the country ("*if you have a fever and cough at this time, you have coronavirus*"), other misinformation was more localized to a particular district or region. For instance, in Jamalpur, the most common piece of misinformation was that "*rubbing alcohol or chlorine all over the body kills the coronavirus that enters the body*" whereas in other districts, "*children do not get coronavirus*" was more common.

Taken together, the Rumor Map suggests that to effectively counter misinformation, we need to develop different communications campaigns across different regions.

The USAID/Bangladesh Mission and BRAC worked together to design these communications campaigns. They engaged with a network of Facebook volunteer groups to address misinformation, used community radio services to broadcast public health information tailored to the local context, and took advantage of a popular TV program with a well-known actor to distribute accurate information about COVID-19.

Importantly, the DEF project served as a catalyst for other possible uses of the Rumor Map extending beyond COVID-19 misinformation: BRAC is now interested in using this digital data collection tool to gather public sentiment about vaccinations, gender-based violence, and other important topics in the Bangladesh digital ecosystem.

SAHEL
SHARING DIGITAL BEST PRACTICES

For the USAID Sahel Regional Office, the Digital Ecosystem Fund (DEF) brought coherence, integration, and rigor to a range of digital development activities across multiple countries. Through seed money provided through DEF, the Mission established a Digital Working Group, building much-needed coordination across actors in the digital ecosystem, including 17 members from state institutions, the private sector, and civil society in Niger, and 15 members from Burkina Faso.

The overarching goals of this coordinating body are to improve development and humanitarian outcomes through the responsible use of technology, learn from each other's efforts, and eliminate the risk of duplication or redundancy.

Several new collaborations emerged from the Digital Working Group after just a few short months, capitalizing on the strengths of various actors in the digital ecosystem. For instance, staff from the USAID Sahel Coordination and Communication Activity activity provided GIS training to the Victory Against Malnutrition Plus project and Youth Connect, two organizations seeking greater mastery in geospatial analysis.

This Digital Working Group continues to this day and has laid the foundation for further collaboration and coordination, and provides a venue for disseminating best practices—such as the Principles for Digital Development—across many projects throughout the region.

KENYA AND EAST AFRICA
TRAINING THE WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

USAID/KEA's Digital Ecosystem Fund (DEF) project sparked several initiatives to promote youth employment across sectors, including the ICT sector.

The Mission used DEF funds to conduct several activities: first, they formed a roundtable with training providers including universities, government officials, and private sector employers to surface the most pressing gaps related to potential employment opportunities in the ICT sector. Second, the Mission conducted a digital skills assessment to better understand the pathways—or lack thereof—from ICT training to employment. Third, the Mission used these findings to launch an ICT training-to-employment program run by Generation Kenya.

By the time the DEF activity ended, Generation Kenya had trained 80 applicants and matched them with employers. Seeing the value of the program, Generation Kenya has since scaled the program on their own, and has now trained >2000 youth and placed them in ICT jobs.

One promising next step is to integrate these lessons into planned workforce activities to develop employment pathways for ICT trainees to take positions in the private and public sectors, thereby boosting ICT capacity across sectors.

The findings from the DEF-supported skills landscape assessment also pointed to a number of other essential gaps in the digital ecosystem: the need to strengthen TVET training, improve distance learning, establish pathways for *sustainable* employment, and develop training on civic leadership, public management, business acumen, and entrepreneurship. The DEF funds were instrumental in kicking off a larger project to address these issues, called the Employment Pathways for Youth program.

ETHIOPIA
DIGITIZING AND STREAMLINING

The Ethiopia Digital Health Activity is a flagship project in the health office at USAID.

With Digital Ecosystem Funding, the Mission has supported several major digital health activities: a maturity assessment to determine areas of priority for the Government of Ethiopia, an eHealth Roadmap and Digital Health Blueprint, and a community of practice among donors, implementers, and officials from the Ethiopian government.

The maturity assessment set a foundation, demonstrating which particular features of the digital health ecosystem needed the most support: these included policy, regulation, and interoperability of health systems, data quality and use, management and workforce needs, among other areas.

Using this baseline information, the Mission has operated a community of practice for health systems improvement. This community (called the eHealth Interoperability Academy) fosters partnerships between subject matter experts from universities and the Ministry of Health to support improved electronic health architecture. For the Mission, there is no question this community of practice—and the interaction with experts across digital health fields—has increased the capacity of Ministry of Health leadership on a range of topics covered in the maturity assessment.

The Digital Ecosystem Fund provided the Mission with flexibility to explore a range of topics with the community of practice, such as how to adapt digital health tools to respond to the demands of COVID-19 (e.g., for health surveillance, patient tracking, health resource management), or how to expand digital health information systems. On this point, the Mission has helped to expand DHIS2—an open source, web-based platform used as a health management information system—to other facilities throughout the country. Expansion of these digital systems is a continuing priority for the Government of Ethiopia, and the eHealth Interoperability Academy can serve as a venue for brainstorming the most effective ways to meet this goal.

Finally, the Digital Ecosystem Fund was instrumental in allowing the Mission to revamp the Ministry of Health's Master Health Facility Registry, which tracks key characteristics of health facilities across the country and offers an opportunity to monitor challenges and improvement in health systems across regions.

Due to overall resource constraints and ongoing conflict, public funding for strengthening digital health systems is limited in Ethiopia. Moving forward, the Mission is prioritizing private sector engagement to strengthen digital health systems, as well as developing creative ways to help the Ministry of Health meet its goals more efficiently.

To learn more, please reach out to the Digital Ecosystem Fund Team (digitalfund@usaid.gov)