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The European Commission and WHO launch landmark digital health initiative to strengthen global health security

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The World Health Organization (WHO) and European Commission have announced today the launch of a landmark digital health partnership.

In June 2023, WHO will take up the European Union (EU) system of digital COVID-19 certification to establish a global system that will help facilitate global mobility and protect citizens across the world from on-going and future health threats, including pandemics. This is the first building block of the WHO Global Digital Health Certification Network (GDHCN) that will develop a wide range of digital products to deliver better health for all.

“Building on the EU’s highly successful digital certification network, WHO aims to offer all WHO Member States access to an open-source digital health tool, which is based on the principles of equity, innovation, transparency and data protection and privacy,” said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. “New digital health products in development aim to help people everywhere receive quality health services quickly and more effectively”.

Based on the [EU Global Health Strategy](#) and [WHO Global strategy on digital health](#), the initiative follows the 30 November 2022 agreement between Commissioner Kyriakides and Dr Tedros to enhance strategic cooperation on global health issues. This further bolsters a robust multilateral system with WHO at its core, powered by a strong EU.

“This partnership is an important step for the digital action plan of the EU Global Health Strategy. By using European best practices we contribute to digital health standards and interoperability globally—to the benefit of those most in need. It is also a powerful example of how alignment between the EU and the WHO can deliver better health for all, in the EU and across the world. As the directing and coordinating authority on international health work, there is no better partner than the WHO to advance the work we started at the EU and further develop global digital health solutions,” said Stella Kyriakides, Commissioner for Health and Food Safety.

This partnership will include close collaboration in the development, management and implementation of the WHO GDHCN system, benefitting from the European Commission’s ample technical expertise in the field. A first step is to ensure that the current EU digital certificates continue to function effectively.

“With 80 countries and territories connected to the EU Digital COVID-19 Certificate, the EU has set a global standard. The EU certificate has not only been an important tool in our fight against the pandemic, but has also facilitated international travel and tourism. I am pleased that the WHO will build on the privacy-preserving principles and cutting-edge technology of the EU certificate to create a global tool against future pandemics,” added Thierry Breton, Commissioner for Internal Market.

A global WHO system building on EU legacy

One of the key elements in the European Union’s work against the COVID-19 pandemic has been digital COVID-19 certificates. To facilitate free movement within its borders, the EU swiftly established interoperable COVID-19 certificates (entitled ‘EU Digital COVID-19 Certificate’ or ‘EU DCC’). Based on open-source technologies and standards it allowed also for the connection of non-EU countries that issue certificates according to EU DCC specifications, becoming the most widely used solution around the world.

From the onset of the pandemic, WHO engaged with all WHO Regions to define overall guidelines for such certificates. To help strengthen global health preparedness in the face of growing health threats, WHO is establishing a global digital health certification network which builds upon the solid foundations of the EU DCC framework, principles and open technologies. With this collaboration, WHO will facilitate this process globally under its own structure with the aim to allow the world to

benefit from convergence of digital certificates. This includes standard-setting and validation of digital signatures to prevent fraud. In doing so, WHO will not have access to any underlying personal data, which would continue to be the exclusive domain of governments.

The first building block of the global WHO system becomes operational in June 2023 and aims to be progressively developed in the coming months.

A long-term digital partnership to deliver better health for all

To facilitate the uptake of the EU DCC by WHO and contribute to its operation and further development, WHO and the European Commission have agreed to partner in digital health.

This partnership will work to technically develop the WHO system with a staged approach to cover additional use cases, which may include, for example, the digitisation of the International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis. Expanding such digital solutions will be essential to deliver better health for citizens across the globe.

This cooperation is based on the shared values and principles of transparency and openness, inclusiveness, accountability, data protection and privacy, security, scalability at a global level, and equity. The WHO and the European Commission will work together to encourage maximum global uptake and participation. Particular attention will be paid to equitable opportunities for the participation by those most in need: low and middle-income countries.

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