



Digital Interventions

inSupply Health and Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition (RHSC) have released a report in 2023 examining strategic supply chain adaptations that were undertaken by stakeholders in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in response to the severe supply chain disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The report, *Adaptations used to ensure contraceptive access during the COVID-19 pandemic*, was issued through RHSC's Compass initiative, which supports greater resilience in supply chains and marketplaces following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2023 report documents adaptation strategies that were planned and/or applied in six categories: policy and advocacy, financing, supply sources, digital interventions, adjusted inventory management policies and procedures, and modified transport options and warehousing solutions. The insights from this report are intended to be used to increase the resilience of supply chains now and in preparation for future crises. This brief documents the findings for one of the six adaptation categories presented in the report.

“So what we did in Nigeria was we moved to a lot of digital adaptations where we were doing a lot of our programming online. We were doing training with providers via WhatsApp and even supportive supervisory visits... I mean I think some of those adaptations have been really successful and so much so that we’ve kept doing them...”

— PSI, Nigeria

Disruptions in global supply chains resulted in local logistical delays and supply shortages. At the same time, restrictions on movement disrupted regular supply planning activities. In the report issued by inSupply Health and RHSC, supply chain and healthcare practitioners describe how they used digital interventions in new and creative ways to capture and enable responses to real-time needs and emerging demand trends. Digital intervention adaptations made use of various technologies, including new or adapted digital and mobile applications, platforms, and systems, to address challenges in reproductive health (RH) supply chains.

Adaptation: Adopt digital platforms for training, orientations, and supervision of service delivery

Movement restrictions imposed significant constraints on the supply chain and healthcare practitioners' ability to carry out training, supervision, and other capacity-building activities that support continuity and quality in the provision of RH services and products. Organizations, such as implementing partners supporting RH programs, leveraged existing digital communications platforms in new ways that were additive

to the existing systems and processes. These platforms were used to introduce online courses and provide continuous training and support to healthcare providers, pharmacy staff, and local project staff. In DRC, Madagascar, and Senegal, commonly used messaging applications, such as WhatsApp, were employed for group activities, commodity management training, and supportive supervision.

Adaptation: Adopt digital platforms for supply chain planning functions and enable more rapid response to supply gaps

With the rapidly changing supply and demand landscape, the existing cadence of planning and resupply activities was not sufficient to capture real-time needs and emerging trends. Digital interventions were crucial to fill this gap by enhancing data visibility and enabling improved inventory management and forecasting. WhatsApp was leveraged as an important tool to collect and aggregate health facility-level data, supporting more frequent forecasting activities and redistribution decisions. In Ghana, community health volunteers used WhatsApp to manage inventory and place orders within the community-based distribution system; they were later provided with order status information such as product availability and supply lead times. Apps were also deployed to map, monitor stock levels across service delivery points, and anticipate stock shortages.

Adaptation: Amend or develop processes and tools for streamlined, virtual decision-making

Early in the pandemic, movement restrictions disrupted the normal flow of business and decision-making. In addition to adopting digital communications platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams to convene teams in virtual settings, organizations, such as PATH and Jhpiego in Senegal and Mali respectively adopted new tools and amended standard operating procedures to formalize their use.

Adaptation: Use telemarketing, virtual visits, and digital platforms to support service providers and supply chain management staff

Even during critical periods, organizations sought to avoid disruption of product supply and service delivery, while protecting the health and safety of staff. Social marketing organizations (SMOs), as seen in Kenya, Senegal and Uganda, developed strategies and systems that used multiple channels to execute structured communications and sales plans. A combination of telemarketing, online meetings, and other virtual fora enabled these organizations to maintain regular communications with customers and clients and respond to emerging needs or issues as they arose.

Key Takeaways

Many of the digital platforms and tools that were adopted during the pandemic enhanced existing processes and have been incorporated into standard operations. Others served as short-term solutions to minimize disruptions to client relationships when movement restrictions were in place. The experiments with digital tools and virtual communication channels proved that telemarketing, telemedicine, etc., could be deployed successfully. However, digital infrastructure and access to reliable internet service are prerequisites for both short- and long-term solutions.

Looking ahead, expanding and strengthening electronic logistics management information system (LMIS) usage across SSA can facilitate greater data visibility and enable increased capacity and skills for the use of data for tactical and strategic supply chain and financing decisions. New digital tools and channels used for capturing and sharing data should be assessed for feasibility and broader scale adoption.