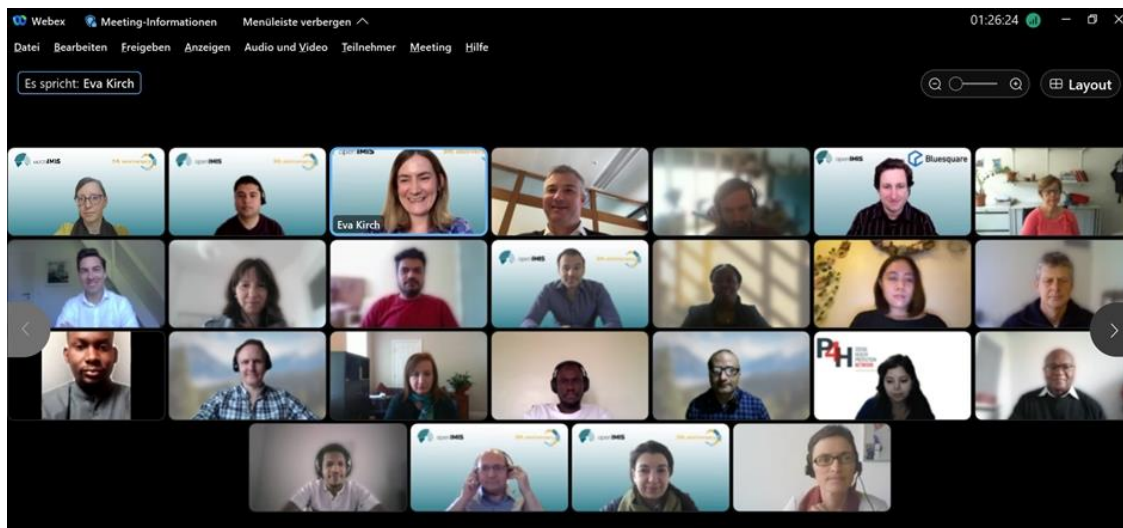


openIMIS Steering Group meeting 2022: Overview and highlights

Members of the openIMIS community met to consider achievements in interoperability and business involvement, and raising the question: how can the community ensure that current and emerging implementations are sustained into the future?



Screenshot of participants

On 27th April 2022, the openIMIS Steering Group Meeting took place virtually. It was attended by experts, users, implementers, donors, and software developers from around the world.

In her welcoming remarks, **Erika Placella**, Head of Global Programme Health Division for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), recalled that from its conception openIMIS was intended to provide three key things: a robust digital data management tool, an open and licence-free product, and a software product that could be adaptable to different schemes and compatible with a variety of existing software products in the health sector. It was this last key goal— the goal of interoperability— that would form the focus for the first half of this Steering Group meeting.

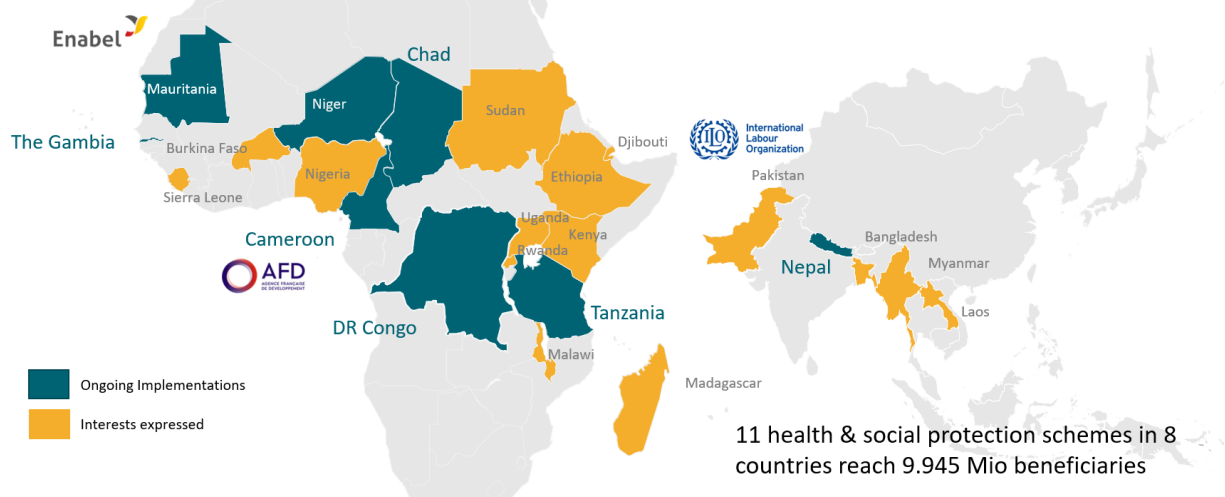
Alexander Schrade, Senior Policy Officer, Division Population Policy, Social Protection for the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), also welcomed participants. He too drew attention to the importance of interoperability, as well as to the large global community of users, implementers, and developers that continues to refine both openIMIS and its implementation. However, as Mr Schrade pointed out, these are not the only factors that draw governments and businesses to openIMIS– there are also economic considerations. openIMIS offers opportunities for local companies to develop software and build sustainable business models. Such business models would be the topic of discussion in the second half of the meeting.

openIMIS in April 2022

Jean Brice Tetka, Technical Advisor, openIMIS Coordination Desk for Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), delivered an overview of openIMIS use-cases and implementing countries. He stated that whilst openIMIS started as an effective tool for health insurance management, the ways in which it is used are now quickly expanding. Today, openIMIS is used for the management of voucher schemes such as maternal care vouchers in Cameroon, for employment injury insurance in Nepal, and also for the management of cash transfer schemes in The Gambia.

As of April 2022, openIMIS supports 11 health and social protection schemes, in 8 countries across Africa and Asia, catering to almost 10 million people. Conversations are ongoing with over 10 more countries interested in using openIMIS.

Where is openIMIS used?



Caption: Shown in blue, countries where openIMIS is currently deployed, and in orange, countries with which dialogues about future implementation are ongoing.

Ensuring interoperability: Four case examples

Saurav Bhattarai, Technical Advisor, openIMIS Coordination Desk for GIZ, introduced the topic of interoperability with a reminder of its benefits; interoperable systems are flexible, reduce costs, and can be tailored to different uses, ultimately providing faster access to higher quality services. The openIMIS initiative has therefore made achieving interoperability with other digital public goods a priority.

Four short presentations from openIMIS implementers in different countries gave examples of interoperability in practice.

Going cashless in Tanzania: SwissTPH Software Engineer **Hiren Soni** explained how openIMIS has been integrated with the Government e-Payment Gateway in Tanzania, allowing the Community Health Funds to collect health insurance contributions free from the problems associated with using cash.

[Payment integration in Tanzania](#) (video); Hiren Soni, Software Engineering and Information System Expert / Swiss TPH

Efficient Scheme Introductions in Nepal: Senior Technical Advisor for GIZ Nepal **Nirmal Dhakal** outlined how the use of openIMIS with other digital tools has enabled the government of Nepal to implement two new social protection schemes in the last six years.

[Interoperability in Nepal implementation](#) (video); Nirmal Dhakal, Senior Technical Advisor / GIZ Nepal

Ongoing Integrations in Cameroon and Niger: Senior Software Engineer at Bluesquare, **Eric Darchis**, laid out current developments of openIMIS, highlighting that the ongoing migration to the modular version of the software will allow for greater integration.

[DHIS2 integration in Cameroon](#) (video); Eric Darchis, openIMIS Lead Developer/ BlueSquare

Meeting Challenges in Zanzibar: Pharmaccess Senior Programme Officer of Digitalisation and Data, **Jonia Bwakea**, explored how the challenges of integration are being addressed in Zanzibar, high-lighting the opportunities for the improvement of health services which are presented by the increased ability to manage data.

[Role of interoperability in promoting use of data to transform health financing strategy to achieve UHC in Zanzibar](#) (video); Jonia Bwakea, Senior Program Officer Digitalization and Data / PharmAccess

openIMIS and business: a panel discussion

In the second part of the meeting, **Olivier Praz**, Senior Policy Advisor, Global Programme Health, SDC, facilitated a discussion regarding the relationship between open source software like openIMIS and private local businesses— those based in countries where openIMIS is or has the potential to be implemented.

Why businesses choose openIMIS: Not having to pay for licenses is an obvious financial benefit to businesses when using open source software, but there are other important advantages. **Yolande M. Goswell**, Project Manager at 2M Corp, the company which customised openIMIS for a cash transfer scheme in Gambia, spoke of the ‘continuous community of developers’ that works to improve openIMIS, which provides valuable support and expertise when meeting challenges, such as in 2M Corp’s recent work transitioning to the modular version of the software. **Maxime Ngoe**, Director General of Y-note, agreed, citing the importance of the community’s ‘knowledge and experiences,’ and the confidence of knowing that openIMIS is continually tested and tried by a diverse set of users.

Mutually beneficial: The advantages of the relationship between open source software and private business are not one-sided. **Uwe Wahser**, ICT Adviser to the openIMIS Coordination Desk at GIZ, highlighted the benefits of proximity to the experience of private businesses. Lessons taken from those developing and implementing openIMIS leads to better, more efficient implementations in the future. Mr Wahser also explained that any companies who sell and distribute the software (as opposed to using it internally) are obliged to feedback any improvements made to the core code. Such code contributions are a huge advantage in the continued improvement and innovation of openIMIS.

Attracting users to openIMIS: Having established the benefits of this relationship for both openIMIS and businesses, panelists considered how the openIMIS initiative might assist businesses when pitching open source software to potential users.

Steven Wanyee Macharia, CEO at IntelliSOFT Consulting, called for a cost analysis and valuation of global goods like openIMIS. He argued that there is misconception about free open source software that it cost nothing to build and isn’t very good. Being able to cite the cost of openIMIS’s development, Mr Wanyee argued, would increase the understanding of its quality, and enable businesses to make a stronger case for its deployment when tendering bids.

Viktoria Couturier, Component Head, openIMIS Initiative, GIZ, furthered this with a call for the whole community to work on the image of open source software, and openIMIS in particular, as ‘a serious product with serious advantages’ over commercial products. **Helen Pryterch**, Health Systems Advocate for Swiss TPH, also high-lighted the necessity of understanding the needs of users and governments in order to be able to appeal directly to them and called for increased efforts in persuading governments to transition to the modular version of the software.

Concluding thoughts: Towards sustainable implementations

A key theme emerging from discussions was that of ensuring sustainable implementations. As **Martin Raab** of Swiss TPH put it, ‘getting things up and running is one thing, but keeping it running [...] is another challenge.’

Mr Wanyee posited that profitable projects sustain themselves and advocated for better business modelling for Global Goods to ensure their sustainable use. He argued, ‘If you’re talking about sustainability, we need to answer the question, who’s going to pay for it?’

Mr Raab emphasised that work to address the misconceptions of open source software is critical, not only when pitching the software to potential new users, but also for securing continued investment in existing implementations. The impact of important but intangible digital tools such as openIMIS needs to be more visible if governments, donors, and decision makers are to continue funding them. To this end, Mr Raab proposed the need for a new idea of some digital tools as *essential*, to be understood on the same level as essential medicines, essential machines, and essential health care workers. openIMIS, for example, as an essential digital tool.

Rodrigo Assumpcao, Social Protection MIS Expert for ILO, wrapped up discussions with praise for the achievements of the openIMIS community, citing developments in interoperability, the adaption of openIMIS to contexts outside of health insurance, and the relationship with local private business. He issued a further call for increased dialogue with implementers and governments moving forward, with the goal of sustainable implementations always in mind. As he put it, ‘the idea that we are buying new products of ‘toys’ [...] has to evolve and mature into the idea of

administering, developing, and managing our technology and data for the foreseeable future.'

Invitation to join the openIMIS Stakeholders Committee

The meeting ended with a warm invitation to meeting participants from Mr Bhattarai to join the new openIMIS Stakeholders Committee. The committee will be part of the governance structure of openIMIS, and be formed of openIMIS stakeholders who may not fit into the existing committee categories, with the intention of diversifying and expanding the voices involved in the development of openIMIS. The committee will advise the initiative on issues such as how they might better support new use-cases and functionalities. For those interested, further details of what is involved, and how to join, are available on the [openIMIS website](#).