

The **second WHO Global Summit on Traditional Medicine**, held in New Delhi, India, on 17–19 December 2025, has the theme of “Restoring balance: The science and practice of health and well-being”. The Summit aligns with the [Global Traditional Medicine Strategy 2025–2034](#), which recognizes Traditional Medicine as a living science that contributes to universal health coverage, health equity and sustainability. The Summit serves as a global platform to accelerate implementation of the new strategy, foster partnerships, and translate pledges and commitments into concrete action.



For more information, contact: tmcentre@who.int

Parallel session 4.B

Harnessing ancestral knowledge in the digital age – equity, ethics and preservation

Plenary 4 and associated parallel sessions will focus on how data, technology and ancestral knowledge can work in balance to establish the standards, ethical frameworks and mechanisms needed for tracking progress, ensuring accountability and operationalizing the future of Traditional Medicine.

This parallel session aims to advance the global dialogue on ethical, equitable and community-driven frameworks for the documentation and digital preservation of ancestral and traditional knowledge. Building on the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science (2021), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) and WHO’s work on Traditional Medicine, the session will explore mechanisms to ensure that digital innovation upholds Indigenous data sovereignty, cultural integrity and fair benefit-sharing, promoting equity and intercultural collaboration.

Rationale

In the digital era, ancestral and Indigenous knowledge faces both unprecedented opportunities for preservation and serious risks of exploitation. Digitization initiatives – while expanding access – often replicate colonial power dynamics by extracting and commodifying traditional knowledge without the free, prior and informed consent of its custodians (1–3). This session is crucial to re-establish ethical balance among technological progress, cultural integrity and social equity – resonating with the Summit’s theme of “Restoring balance: The science and practice of health and well-being”. Anchored in the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) and the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science (2021), the discussion advances the Global Traditional Medicine Strategy 2025–2034 by promoting equitable governance, respect for Indigenous sovereignty and protection of traditional knowledge as living systems vital to human and planetary well-being (1,2). The session builds on frameworks such as the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance – Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility and Ethics (4) – and innovations such as Traditional Knowledge (TK) Labels that enable communities to embed cultural protocols and ethical metadata into digital infrastructures (5). These and other innovative approaches seek to ensure that digital ecosystems are grounded in reciprocity, transparency and cultural self-determination (6–9). By fostering dialogue among Indigenous leaders, policymakers and digital innovators, the session contributes to a global agenda where technology becomes a vehicle for healing and balance – ensuring that the digital transformation of knowledge strengthens, rather than undermines, the cultural and ecological wisdom that sustains collective well-being (10,11).

Objectives

- Share lessons learned from global and regional experiences on the ethical digitization and preservation of ancestral and Indigenous knowledge, highlighting frameworks that uphold Indigenous data sovereignty and cultural rights.
- Explore innovative approaches and digital tools that promote equitable and community-driven governance of knowledge in the digital age.

- Examine policy considerations for integrating ethical Indigenous data governance into national and international frameworks in line with WHO and UNESCO guidance.
- Build consensus on next steps towards advancing the implementation of the existing frameworks, ensuring inclusion, equity and protection of Indigenous Peoples' rights in digital innovation and knowledge systems.

Guiding questions

1. How can digital technologies be harnessed to safeguard and revitalize ancestral and Indigenous knowledge while respecting cultural protocols and data sovereignty?
2. What ethical and legal frameworks are needed to ensure that digitization processes benefit Indigenous Peoples and local communities, rather than contributing to knowledge extraction or misappropriation?
3. In what ways can innovative approaches and digital tools be operationalized within national and international systems to promote equitable and culturally grounded knowledge governance?
4. How can governments, multilateral organizations and Indigenous-led initiatives collaborate to co-design digital infrastructures that uphold equity, inclusion and Indigenous self-determination?
5. What mechanisms for accountability and consent should be embedded in data systems and policies to align with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science (2021) and the Global Traditional Medicine Strategy 2025–2034?
6. How can the outcomes of this dialogue inform immediate, practical steps that participants and institutions can take to advance the implementation of the existing frameworks and address the current gaps that still hinder ethical and effective governance of ancestral knowledge?

Session format

The proposed session format begins with opening remarks by the moderator on safeguards for traditional ancestral knowledge and medicine. These remarks will be followed by two keynote presentations on knowledge sharing and the dual accountabilities of Indigenous medicine, as well as gender, equity and rights related to Traditional Medicine. It will then transition into a multiregional expert panel in which each speaker responds to a guiding question aligned with their expertise, ensuring a balanced exploration of themes such as participatory knowledge governance, crisis resilience, digital ethics and the protection of traditional medicinal knowledge. An interactive Q&A will invite participants to contribute reflections and explore opportunities for collaboration. The session will conclude with a synthesis of key messages, highlighting priority considerations and actionable recommendations for advancing ethical and community-led stewardship of ancestral knowledge in the digital age.

References

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