



CPHIA 2023: realising Africa's new public health order

The annual Conference on Public Health in Africa has quickly become a key event for shaping Africa's health future. Munyaradzi Makoni reports.

"Health is not only a matter of medical science but also of policy, equity, and global cooperation", said Jean Kaseya, Director-General of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), on Nov 27 in a speech at the 2023 Conference on Public Health in Africa (CPHIA) in Lusaka, Zambia. "It beckons us to harness technology's power, embrace equity and social justice principles, and foster robust collaborations that span borders and disciplines. It demands a concerted effort to amplify the voices of the most vulnerable among us...Together we can break, and we will break the barriers that have hindered our progress for far too long and we can forge a new public health order for Africa—one that is resilient, equitable, and capable of meeting the challenges of the future." The ambition of a new public health order for Africa is now a major focus of health policy on the continent, and the CPHIA has become a key forum for exploring how it might be made a reality.

The origins of both the public health order and CPHIA lie in the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted many of the issues for Africans that had long been known but had never been adequately addressed: overburdened and underfunded health systems; little intensive care unit capacity, along with shortages of fundamental equipment such as bottled oxygen and ventilators; and huge inequities in access to new medical countermeasures, particularly COVID-19 vaccines. These failures of global health sharpened the minds of Africa's health communities. "This period brought to the forefront issues like vaccine inequity, vaccine hesitancy, and the drawbacks of historically top-down and predominantly donor-driven global aid", said Caxton Murira, programme lead at the Clinical

Research and Trials Community at Science for Africa Foundation in Kenya. The pandemic also forged a unity of purpose. The pan-African Partnership to Accelerate COVID-19 Testing, the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust, the Africa Medical Supplies Platform, and the Africa Pathogen Genomics Initiative have all been established in recent years.

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These developments prompted the vision for the new public health order, conceived by the African Union and the Africa CDC. John Nkengasong, former Director of the Africa CDC, outlined the plan in 2021 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, based on five pillars. First, strong African regional health institutions to guide priorities, coordinate policies, set standards, and enhance disease surveillance. Second, improved access to life-saving medicines and equipment achieved through expanded manufacturing of vaccines, diagnostics, and therapeutics. Third, a strengthened public health workforce to address health threats, including leadership programmes. Fourth, increased domestic investment in health. And fifth, development of respectful partnerships.

In 2021, the African Union and Africa CDC also started CPHIA. "The CPHIA aims to provide a unique African-led platform for leaders across the continent to reflect on lessons learned in health and science and align on a way forward for creating more resilient health systems on the continent", Shingai Machingaidze, Africa CDC's Acting Chief Scientist, told *The*

Lancet. More than 12 000 participants attended the first meeting virtually to share lessons learnt and accelerate progress in addressing COVID-19 and other health challenges. "CPHIA served as a platform for streamlining policies and actions that saw Africa through the pandemic", said Machingaidze. It was an event at which speakers could advocate for the principles of the new public health order. "Allow me to also persuade you that it is time for a new way of doing things on the continent to achieve our health security", said Ahmed Ogwel Ouma, Acting Director of Africa CDC, during the second CPHIA conference in 2022, in Kigali, Rwanda. "A vision that takes Africa from always following others to a continent that is confident in its own skin."

"CPHIA has provided a fertile ground for policy makers and policy advocacy groups", said Murira, "to have honest discussions about what are the pertinent needs and next steps to advance the African public health ecosystem." The conference, he said, "has highlighted the already existing capacities for Africa to come up with home-grown solutions for problems such as efforts towards African-led drug discovery research and development as well as local manufacturing that mostly affect the patients and populations".

In November, 2023, more than 5000 scientists, policy makers, and advocates gathered at the Mulungushi International Conference Centre in Lusaka to hear Kaseya and others speak at CPHIA 2023. Little original research was presented at the Lusaka meeting. Instead, the focus was on discussion and calls to action for strengthening health and medicine across the continent.

The agenda closely followed the pillars of the new public health order, including tracks on health security, pandemic

preparedness, and universal health coverage. Particular emphasis was given to boosting the manufacturing of medical technologies. Africa CDC has outlined an ambitious agenda to ensure that by 2040, a minimum of 60% of vaccines and medicines used in Africa are manufactured on the continent—up from less than 1% currently. “Local manufacturing is the second independence of Africa because it will mitigate our reliance on external sources, build our health security, promote local innovation, and lead for job creation, economic growth, peace, and security”, Kaseya said at CPHIA. A key part of this ambition is the Partnership for African Vaccine Manufacturing Initiative, established by the African Union in April, 2021. The initiative aims to galvanise regulatory capacity building, technical partnerships, vaccine-procurement sharing mechanisms, and access to innovative finance. On Dec 7, 2023, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, announced the launch of a new financial instrument worth US\$1 billion—the Africa Vaccine Manufacturing Accelerator—to help African manufacturers offset high start-up costs and provide assurance of demand. France and Africa CDC, alongside European and international partners, will co-host the official launch of the Accelerator in June, 2024.

Addressing the opening plenary, John-Arne Røttingen, Norway's Ambassador for Global Health and Wellcome Trust Chief Executive Officer, said that improving manufacturing “isn't enough” as the continent needs to build an entire “biomedical system” through “African health research systems led by Africans”. “When it comes to clinical trials, traditionally, the landscape in Africa has received suboptimal investments at only about 3% globally and many countries remain unrepresented in the conduct of randomised clinical trials”, Murira told *The Lancet*.

Kaseya also used his remarks to call for greater investment in the health workforce. He said “less than 10% of

African countries can respond to a major outbreak with a skilled health workforce. Africa requires 6000 field epidemiologists, currently, there are only 1900. The continent needs 25 000 front-line epidemiologists, yet presently there are just 5000”. Kaseya said that Africa CDC plans to manage the looming crisis of health-workers shortage by increasing the number of paid community health workers on the continent to 2 million by 2030.

Among the biggest health challenges facing Africa were the shortage of appropriately trained staff, lack of resources, and inadequate or unclear regulations, said Talkmore Maruta, Director of Programmes at the African Society for Laboratory Medicine, in a talk at CPHIA. The capacity to comply with international agreements, including the WHO International Health Regulations and the United Nations Biological Weapons Convention, is lacking, Maruta said.

Lewis Brown, former Minister of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism in Liberia, called on African leaders to invest in health by creating an enabling environment and strengthening the existing health systems. Brown foresaw “a health system where African leaders do not leave their countries for other African countries for medical check-ups and treatment”. As the Liberian health system grapples with the emigration of health workers and limited investments in health, among other issues, Brown called for repositioning Africa as “an enabling learning environment for training young people in medicine and sciences to help address the brain drain”.

Merawi Aragaw Tegegne, head of Surveillance and Disease Intelligence at Africa CDC, emphasised the need for collaborative efforts in strengthening health-care systems and promoting resilience to address disease threats. He said “Africa was vulnerable for infectious disease and other health emergency stressors, including extreme weather events, conflict, and

displacement. Over the last 30 years, over 30 new pathogens have been reported across Africa and, of these, 75% are animal origin”, adding that “Africa reports over 100 emergencies every year and this year alone the continent has already experienced 158 health emergencies.”

Sabin Nsanzimana, Rwanda's Minister of Health, discussed pandemic preparedness and response for Africa. The situation after COVID-19 has shown that “we have all we need here at home in our countries, in our programmes, what we need more is how do we work together to strengthen our laboratories, our teams, our field epidemiologists, our response, detection capacities and how do we collaborate with real-time data sharing that is known in Lusaka, in Cairo, in Congo Brazzaville, and other parts of Africa and beyond”, he said. “Our solutions can be south to south or to take to the north from the south but number one is leadership as it drives everything. Leadership needs science. We need facts to make the right decisions and also the community to be part of the solutions otherwise leadership and science alone cannot solve community problems”, Nsanzimana said. The sentiment was shared by the President of Zambia, Hakainde Hichilema, who expressed optimism that CPHIA 2023 would help Africa transition from discussions to concrete implementation. “Now is the moment to dedicate ourselves to the diligent efforts required to realise our goals”, he said.

Enabling Africa to set its health agenda is what CPHIA is all about. “Having a major conference like CPHIA on the continent here in Africa means that we can change the narrative”, said Machingaidze. “It means that we can lead the conversation. We can change it by centring what matters most to African communities and spotlighting extraordinary science from African researchers that would normally go unnoticed”, she added.

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