

# Coordinating the regional effort at ECSA-HC

## Yoswa Dambisya elaborates the role of the East, Central and Southern African Health Community

The East, Central and Southern African Health Community (ECSA-HC) arose out of informal meetings of health ministers of newly independent African countries on the sidelines of the Commonwealth Health Ministers Conferences. During the Regional Health Conference of the East, Central and Southern Africa Commonwealth countries hosted by Botswana in November 1973, two key decisions were taken: one was to establish a Regional Secretariat as a permanent mechanism for ensuring collaboration among the commonwealth countries in this region; the second was the ready offer by the United Republic of Tanzania to host that Secretariat in Arusha. Even at that early stage, Tanzania was prepared to grant the Secretariat full diplomatic status on a par with the other UN organisations it already hosted.

A secretariat known as the Commonwealth Regional Health Secretariat for East, Central and Southern Africa was established with a staff of three, two of whom were technical and one was a stenographer. All the support at that time was provided by the Commonwealth Secretariat in London. However, in 1980, the meeting of Health Ministers resolved to transfer the full ownership of the organisation to the Member States in the region.

The current membership includes 9 member states: the Kingdoms of Eswatini and Lesotho, and the Republics of Kenya, Malawi, Mauritius, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The institution is governed by a Convention that details the mandate, organs, functions and objectives.

### Mandate, vision and mission

ECSA-HC was established with a mandate to promote and encourage efficiency and relevance in the provision of health services in the region and has a vision to be the leader in health in East, Central and Southern Africa, contributing towards the attainment of the highest standard of physical, mental and social well-being of the people in the region. The mission of ECSA-HC is to promote the highest standards of health for the individuals, families and communities through advocacy, capacity building, brokerage, coordination, inter-sectoral collaboration and harmonisation of health policies and programmes.

In order to fulfill its mandate, vision and mission ECSA-HC pursues the following objectives:

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(a) to maintain and extend cooperation among member States for the improvement of health systems and services;

(b) to undertake such activities as shall contribute towards the attainment of the highest standard of health for its people;

(c) to promote access to health services that are efficient, effective, equitable and of the highest quality;

(d) to promote the development of human resources for health through the establishment and strengthening of educational and training institutions and programmes;

(e) to encourage and facilitate co-operation between health administrations of Member States and international health organisations and institutions; and

(f) to encourage and facilitate the conduct of research, dissemination and application of health research findings.



### Programmes and projects

The Secretariat has a number of expert committees that bring together experts, partners and other lead voices on topical issues to help shape the agenda that eventually gets to the Health Ministers through the Best Practices Forum.

In the area of knowledge management, the institution facilitates evidence generation on health, especially towards facilitating the use of such evidence for decision making in addition to sharing best practices within the region and sometimes beyond.

ECSA advocates on a wide range of issues and capacity development has been one of the essence of its existence from the outset. ECSA supports member states in the implementation of their health priorities and mobilising resources through strategic partnerships. There are some success stories of doing this and obtaining resources for regional programming from the Global Fund, the World Bank, the European Union, USAID, Norad.

As a Regional Platform, ECSA has used its convening power to provide a space for engagement and leveraging of resources towards common efforts as well as providing opportunities for networking and exchange of knowledge.

The Secretariat is a rallying point for member states in reviewing and disaggregating global targets and agenda statements like SDGs, and Universal Health Coverage the with a view of interrogating and understanding what that would mean to the region.

### Human capacity development

ECSA contributes to strengthening the capacities of the Ministries of Health for engagement in the global arena.



In partnership with others including ACHEST, EQUINET, the Peoples Health Movement and a number of other partners from the civil society, ECSA has had occasions over the years of strengthening the way African delegations participate in the global arena through Global Health Diplomacy.

The establishment of the College of Health Sciences under the ECSA umbrella may perhaps be seen as a game changer. The impetus for this was towards contributing to the training of human capacity within the region, and within a short period of time, seven constituent colleges have been established (ECSACON, COSECSA, COECSA, COPECSA, CANECSA, ECSACOP, ECSACOG). There has been advanced work towards ECSA College of Public Health Physicians and ECSA College of Oncologists and some progress in Paediatrics and Radiology fraternities.

### **COSECSA, the success story**

This is the story of the College of Surgeons of East, Central and Southern Africa. Since its inception in 1999, the college has produced a total of 346 specialist surgeons and about 50 of those 346 are female. Given the modality of training that was adopted, about 120 hospitals have been accredited across the region to date. The college of surgeons has been opened up to the entire region from Ethiopia to Namibia to very many training facilities which would otherwise not have been the case. COSECSA can boast of retention of 88.2% of surgeons in the country of training.

### **Health systems strengthening**

ECSA contributes to the leadership and governance capacities in the ministries of health through global diplomacy training. There has been targeted training of senior officials of ministries of health on National Health Workforce Accounts to better inform the allocation and distribution of these resources that are always thought to be scarce.

ECSA Secretariat is increasingly engaging within the region on the discourse and dialogue on sustainable and

alternative financing modalities towards Universal Health Coverage. ECSA has contributed and continues to contribute through some of the strategic partnerships to the improvements in diagnostic capacity within the region. Part of the reason for preparedness and why the region is a little better prepared to address and respond to some of the challenges have been as a result of what the organisation has done with them through a number of initiatives such as the East African Public Health Laboratory Networking Project, the Southern Africa TB and Health Systems Support Project, the Global Fund Regional Project which the Secretariat is working on very closely with the Uganda supranational TB Reference Lab.

The strengthening of capacities to manage, control the emerging and reemerging diseases has included a number of strategies including; the establishment of communities of practice, the establishment and ensuring operationalisation of cross-border committees, the response to the global antimicrobial resistance surveillance system and the conduct of table-top simulations. In a number of cases, some of the teams have moved from some of these table-top simulations to immediately support responses in some of our countries. Lastly, ECSA is increasingly trying to develop SMART investment cases for Health Systems Strengthening through leveraging existing or prospective funding opportunities.

### **Opportunities through ECSA-HC**

ECSA Health Community is open for business and by all indications it should be the premier sub-regional organization for cooperation and collaboration on health towards achievement of the SDGs. It has well-established policy dialogue mechanisms; it bridges the gap between evidence and policy, it continuously improves the technical integrity and has the processes for shared learning and continuous improvement. The procedures, processes and timeliness are all geared towards ensuring that it becomes a stronger regional organisation.

ECSA has platforms for genuine partnerships across the sectors, and remains a learning organisation.