

The 12th ECSA-HC Best Practices Forum

Edward Kataika and Nomsa Mulima elaborate innovation and accountability in health towards achieving Universal Health Coverage



The 12th ECSA-HC Best Practices Forum was held in Arusha, Tanzania from 19th to 21st June 2019 under the theme 'Innovation and Accountability in Health Towards Achieving Universal Health Coverage'. It brought together senior government officials from the nine ECSA Member States, senior academics from health training and research institutions from the member states, experts from partner organizations within the region and beyond.

The Best Practices Forum is a regional platform which brings together diverse stakeholders and aims to share best practices and research evidence, identify relevant health policy issues and make recommendations to health Ministers, towards improving health programming and outcomes in the region.

The theme of the 12th Best Practices Forum was addressed through six sub-themes. The deliberations of the forum as summarized in the following sections below.

Innovation and accountability for UHC

Deliberations focused on the various innovative options for increasing the share of domestic health financing as a means towards improving financial sustainability of health

Edward Kataika is the Director of Programmes at ECSA-HC and Nomsa Mulima is a Public Health Expert at ECSA-HC.

services, but also equity and financial protection in the region. The forum also received a report of the Pathways for Prosperity Commission on Health in the Digital Age, which suggests how the health sector may leverage the innovations in information and communication technology to improve access to quality health care to populations in need.

Improving adolescent and young people's health

Country experience on the integration of youth-friendly services in public hospitals in Tanzania was shared. The integration translated into increased utilization of sexual and reproductive health services in the country. Promising practices in the use of mobile phone technologies to improve access to and quality of family planning services were also presented. The forum deliberated on the various constraints impeding the uptake of reproductive health services, particularly among adolescents. Constraints ranged from cultural and social factors, and health system-related, including the limited availability of skilled providers of the services. Deliberations also underscored the importance of addressing the health seeking-behavior of male adolescents and the promotion of male involvement in reproductive health matters.



Building health systems that deliver for all: learning from experience

A special session was held to disseminate results of a multi-country review of the development, costing and use of Essential Health Benefit (EHB) packages, to promote equity and advance universal health coverage at country level. The review was conducted in Eswatini, Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia.

While highlighting best practices in the design and delivery of benefit packages, the review revealed weaknesses in the collaboration between the health sector and other sectors in addressing bottlenecks to healthcare access by various segments of the population. Participants also acknowledged the important role of the private sector in health service provision, to reduce health inequalities. The forum re-emphasized the important role of domestic financing in increasing access to healthcare, calling on member state governments to implement various mechanisms that increase domestic financing.

Prioritising substance use and mental health challenges in ECSA region

An overview presentation revealed that mental health and substance abuse do not feature highly among the priority health issues of most countries in the ECSA region. Mental health programmes in the region are still under developed, even though the population affected by substance abuse and the use of psychoactive substances is steadily increasing. Substance abuse is on the rise due to rising youth unemployment, but also due to increased cross-border trade and influx of goods and services from other regions, among others. While most ECSA countries have made progress in developing policies and legislation to control alcohol abuse, for instance, implementation of such policies remains a challenge.

To address mental health issues more effectively, the forum called for the decentralisation of mental health services to the sub-national level and the adoption of community-based approaches to dealing with the socio-economic factors of the problem.

Opportunities for achieving WASH global target

Presentations in this session noted that Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 calls for the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; highlighting that universal access to WASH is essential to ending preventable deaths from water-related diseases, for improving nutrition and service delivery. It is estimated that every US Dollar invested in WASH yields a five-fold return in health and economic benefits. It was further

noted that while 60% of the world population is projected to live in cities by 2030, over half of this population will live in slums, where WASH poses a big challenge.

The expansion of access to WASH services, focusing on reducing disparities between the rich and the poor, as well as urban and rural populations, was recommended. This would be achieved through the involvement of the private sector in the provision of this service as corporate social responsibility, among others. Countries are also encouraged to review WASH strategies, to incorporate SDG targets on access, equity and the new focus on safely managed services.

A regional approach to recurrent outbreaks

The forum received an update on the outbreak of Ebola in Uganda, which the Ministry of Health officially declared on 11th June 2019. Uganda had since the year 2000 experienced five Ebola Virus Disease outbreaks, which predominantly occur in the western part of the country. The index case was of a 5-year-old child who had travelled back with his family from DRC through an undesignated border post in Kasese district to bury a relative, who had succumbed to the same disease. As of 19th June, 2019, there were three confirmed cases, three suspected cases, zero probable cases and three deaths.

As experience in the management of recurring outbreaks was shared, the forum noted the need for multi-sectoral collaboration (one health approach) in managing outbreaks, including WASH concerns for cholera and other waterborne related outbreaks and zoonotic diseases. It was further noted that preparedness and response to outbreaks requires financial commitment from governments and other stakeholders. Furthermore, countries should invest in the preparedness for outbreaks and other public health events and strengthen Public Health Institutes to coordinate surveillance systems through a multi-sectoral approach.

Conclusion

The 12th Best Practices Forum came up with seven recommendations, covering the conference theme, six sub-themes and the special session on the Essential Benefit Packages. These recommendations will be presented to the upcoming Health Ministers Conference for further deliberation and adoption as Resolutions. These Resolutions provide guidance to member states on the collective action to be taken, in order to address the common challenges identified at the regional platform.