

# Partnerships in the time of COVID-19

Carol Natukunda reports on a conference hosted by THET-UK, ACHEST and the Esther Alliance

“We live in a globalised world. COVID-19 has made it evident that a problem in one corner of the world is a problem across the world. Therefore, we have no choice but to partner and ensure that the world is a better place. This is what the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are about, it is what universal health coverage (UHC) is about.”

This was one of the messages from Professor Francis Omaswa as he gave concluding remarks at the second COVID-19 partnerships conference on 19 March 2021. The virtual conference was hosted by THET UK in partnership with the African Centre for Global Health and Social Transformation (ACHEST) and Esther Alliance.

It was held under the theme: “COVID-19 Partnerships in the International Year of Health and Care Workers: Protect. Invest. Together.” This is in line with the World Health Organization year-long campaign to recognise health workers for their dedication and resilience in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants had the opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved by the health partnership community since the first conference in April 2020, and also to look into the future, recognising the immense pressure that is now falling on health workers in every country due to the pandemic. With the worrying increases in infections and the slow pace of vaccination campaigns in sub-Saharan Africa observed since the start of 2021, the conference discussed afresh how the Health Partnership community is pulling together, especially now, when solidarity is more important than ever.

## Going together

“COVID-19 has been described as not only a health crisis, but an economic and social one. This conference is all about partnership and it is evident that we cannot achieve anything without partnerships. Humans are naturally inclined to feel sympathy and empathy for others. This humanity drives our partnerships,” said Prof Omaswa.

He added that “The SDGs themselves are interdependent and interconnected and we have to work as partners – through various sectors and countries – to achieve them. An African proverb says, ‘If you want to go fast, you can go alone, but if you really want to go far, go together.’ Let us not move away from partnerships, let us continue to build and

strengthen the way we work together. Partnership is a must.”

THET Director Ben Simms said, “We will never look at the world in the same way. We have been reminded about inequality, racism, about the underfunding of health services; and the effects of the pandemic continue to be felt. We need to argue that every health worker has the right to be properly equipped and supported. That every health worker, as every citizen, has the right to be vaccinated.”

The virtual conference had 412 participants from 44 countries across the globe. It also had 16 sessions and 48 speakers on wellness and compassion towards health workers, advocacy, health systems strengthening and COVID-19 response among others.

Talking about compassion, Prof Omaswa said, “What strikes me is that while health workers are taught to care about other people, we are not taught to care about ourselves. Now is time to change this. 2021 is the International Year of Health and Care Workers. Let us not let it pass without something changing, that enables us to better organise as health workers to serve the people. We cannot serve if we are not given the support, incentives, and environment that we need. We are the people that will push for this change.”

## Learning

Moving forward, three points were noted:

1. Build leadership for health workers: There is need to have leadership at national, sub-national, and community levels. We must organise ourselves so that we are in touch with our communities, so that we can form a triangle that moves mountains. One corner of the triangle is what are the needs of the people? The other corner is what are the solutions to the needs of the people – these solutions are thereby generated by experts such as academics, local communities, health professionals etc. If knowledge-generators worked closely with communities to understand the needs of the people and stood alongside each other when presenting solutions to policymakers (the third corner of the triangle), politicians would feel more inclined to implement those solutions.
2. There is a need for an independent voice that can speak truth to power authoritatively and without fear on behalf of health workers
3. An action plan to initiate change will be devised.

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