Towards an African Institute of Public Health

A bold proposal for a new virtual institute for health policy, advocacy, research and education

African countries, as with other countries in the Global South, have major public health problems with an insufficient trained workforce and research leadership to respond to these problems. While African healthcare in general suffers from a lack of sufficient human resource in the health sector,[1] there is also a particular lack of research capacity to address the health challenges.[2] Part of this is due to over reliance on the Global North for research leadership, and a resulting failure to develop research which is appropriate to the local context. Reidpath and Allotey identify a need to "engage more effectively with the growing, if disempowered, talent in the Global South to support the building of enabling environments to raise the leadership, quality and volume of home grown, contextually driven and sustainable solutions".[2] A paper in Times Higher Education 'Are research links with the developing world still a one-way street?' demonstrates the need for research leadership to come from the Global South.[3]

At the same time, African populations have many potential resources to deal with the public health problems they face. There are a number of MPH programmes which produce well-trained graduates.[4] Of relevance to this paper is the experience of the People's Open Access Education Initiative (or Peoples-uni) towards capacity building in Africa and other low- to middle-income settings, which "shows the feasibility of affordable, high quality online education and that there is scope for accelerating capacity building programmes through partnerships with higher education institutions and health(care) organisations".[5] An external evaluation of Peoples-uni concludes with the challenge "to see how to take full advantage of the current, and future, graduates to turn this from an education programme into a capacity-building

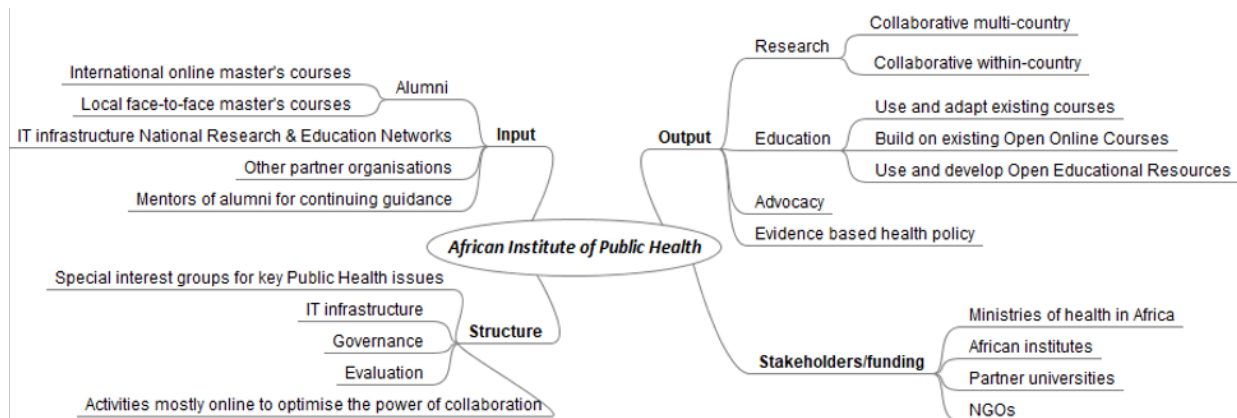Richard F Heller MD FRCP FFPH. Emeritus Professor, Universities of Manchester UK, and Newcastle Australia. rfheller4@gmail.com.
Osita Okonkwo MD MPH FPHP&M FRSPH. Initiative for Improved Population Health Access and Empowerment (iphAE), Enugu, Nigeria. osita@iphae.org.
Pasipanodya Ian Machingura MPH DPhil PhD. Department of Laboratory Diagnostic and Investigative Sciences, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Zimbabwe imachingura@yahoo.co.uk.
Sanjeev Sridharan PhD. The Evaluation Centre for Complex Health Interventions, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto. SanjeevSridharan@msn.com
Omo Oaiya Bpharm. West and Central African Research and Education Network, Accra, Ghana. kodion@gmail.com

programme with real impact".[6]

While many may argue that infrastructural challenges constitute a significant barrier to online education in Africa, there appears to be a growing IT infrastructure to support research and infrastructure in Africa.[7]

These themes lead to the idea to leverage the strengths of African alumni from international and local online and face-to-face MPH courses. Many of these alumni are based in frontline and policy organisations in Africa, and could join with others to build and lead an African Institute of Public Health. The National Research and Education Networks which provide affordable IT infrastructure for Africa would be key partners, including the West and Central African Research and Education Network (WACREN – www.wacren.net) and UbuntuNet Alliance, the regional research and education networking organisation for Eastern and Southern Africa (www.ubuntunet.net). Inspiration for this initiative comes from the African Economic Research Collaboration (http://aercafrica.org).

The goals of this institute will include:

1. An alumni-led identification and prioritisation of problems that need to be addressed by the African and the global public health communities through research and evidence;
2. Creating "spaces" (forums, etc) with African policy makers to support and spread the buy-in from governing organisations of the prioritised problems;
3. Building connections with leading Public Health academics (and academic organisations) to develop a research agenda around the prioritised problems;

Figure 1: Components of an African Institute of Public Health

4. Using the social capital of the alumni network and the invited policy and academic network members to develop actions and strategies around the prioritised areas for action;
5. Education – building on the expertise of the Alumni (and similar) to 'snowball' capacity building through online courses. This would include hybrid courses with face-to-face components, and short courses;
6. Research – performing collaborative research among the members of the Institute and partners to tackle the prioritised problems.

Evaluation

A key component of all of this work will be a monitoring, learning and evaluation system that will be developmental – this focus will inform what needs to be done to reach its goals. A second focus will be navigational – clear performance metrics will also be developed to assess progress towards goals. As part of developing the theory of change of this initiative, one key focus will be context mapping that will attempt to link this initiative to other initiatives that are focused on building Public Health capacities in Africa.

Structure

Figure 1 shows various components of an African Institute of Public Health: inputs are provided by the alumni of master's courses, their mentors and infrastructure from National Research and Education Networks; outputs include research, education, advocacy and evidence-based health policy. The components of the structure to govern and run such an Institute and the potential stakeholders are also identified in the figure

Critical questions that guide this include: Would a core infrastructure support group be helpful? Would the development of country-level sub-groupings be useful and if so what form might they take and how supported? What type of funding support should be sought? How do we define the type of work – is it more in line with 'think tank' type activities than NIH type research projects? How does the group engage policy makers and the group's activities best lead to change?

Getting started

In order to realise the concept, an African led steering group has been formed, and a URL has been reserved: publichealth.africa.org. Early stage projects are planned as proof of concept, and all are invited to join and help evolve both the concept and details of emerging projects. We hope that in this way an idea of how such an Institute might evolve could derive from those who are prepared to become involved.

Collaborations

Key to the success of this venture will be the ability to attract partners. We hope that the publication of this paper will help to identify those who might want to be part of this development. We welcome all comments and suggestions, as well as offers to partner or advise. Please contact any of the authors for more information or interest in collaboration.

References

1. Oleribe OO, Momoh J, Uzochukwu BSC, Mbofana F, Adebiyi A, Barbera T, Williams R, Taylor-Robinson SD. Identifying Key Challenges Facing Healthcare Systems In Africa And Potential Solutions. Int J Gen Med. 2019;12:395-403 https://doi.org/10.2147/IJGM.S223882
2. Reidpath DD, Allotey P. 2019. 'The Problem of "Trickle-down Science" from the Global North to the Global South'. BMJ Global Health 4: e001719. https://doi.org/10.1136/ bmjgh-2019-001719.
3. Baker S, Thompson A. Are research links with the developing world still a one-way street? Times Higher Education, January 2020. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/are-research-links-developing-world-still-one-way-street (Accessed 18/01/2020)
4. Dlungwane T, Voce A, Searle R, Stevens F. Master of Public Health programmes in South Africa: issues and challenges. Public Health Rev. 2017;38:5. doi: 10.1186/s40985-017-0052-9.
5. Heller RF, Strobl J, Madhok R. Online Education for Public Health Capacity Building in Low- to Middle-Income Countries: The Peoples-uni Experience. IRRODL [Internet]. 2019: http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/3927
6. Sridharan S, Bondy M, Nakaima A et al. The potential of an online educational platform to contribute to achieving sustainable development goals: a mixed-methods evaluation of the Peoples-uni online platform. Health Res Policy Sys 16, 106 (2018). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-018-0381-2
7. Foley, M. 2016. The Role and Status of National Research and Education Networks in Africa. SABER-ICT Technical Paper Series;. World Bank, Washington, DC. © World Bank. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/26258 License: CC BY 3.0 IGO. (Accessed 18/01/2021).