

The East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC) 13th Best Practices Forum (BPF) and 71st Health Ministers Conference (HMC), February 2023.

Walter D Odoch and Yoswa M Dambisya give a summary report of the 13th BPF and 71st HMC held in Maseru in February 2023

Introduction

The East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC) held its 71st Health Ministers Conference (HMC) in Maseru, Kingdom of Lesotho, on 8th and 9th February 2023. The HMC was preceded by the 29th Directors Joint Consultative Committee (DJCC) meeting and 13th ECSA-HC Best Practices Forum (BPF) which were held from 5th to 7th February 2023. This series of meetings brought together more than 150 participants, and presented an opportunity for senior officials from ministries of health, heads of health training and research institutions from the nine ECSA Member States, the leadership of the ECSA College of Health Sciences and its constituent Colleges, United Nations Agencies dealing with health matters, development partners such as the World Bank and Global Fund, civil society and non-state actors, programme implementers, and diverse collaborating partners from the region and beyond, to interact with the various layers of policy and decision makers within the ECSA-HC governance framework.

ECSA-HC is a regional nine-member intergovernmental health organisation whose mandate is to foster regional cooperation in all matters of health. Its programming and implementation footprint currently covers more than 20 countries. The organisation has over the years institutionalised the BPF as a regional evidence-to-use platform for fostering evidence informed health programming and policy development. The BPF brings together ministries of health and other government sectors/agencies, researchers, health implementing organizations, and a wide range of other stakeholders to share lessons and experiences towards influencing policy. The theme and sub-themes for the BPF are set out by the HMC, which is the highest organ of ECSA-HC.

In February 2023, the meetings (BPF, DJCC and HMC) were held under the overall theme of “Stronger Health Systems Post COVID-19 for the attainment of Universal Health Coverage in the ECSA region”, while the sub-themes focused on:

- Country and Regional Response to COVID-19: Challenges, lessons and opportunities

- Strengthening health systems for prevention, preparedness, detection of and response to emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases.
- Consolidating sustainable local solutions for Human Resources for Health
- Accelerating interventions and gender inclusiveness towards better health outcomes
- Innovative approaches towards sustainable financing of health care

The 13th Best Practices Forum

The 13th Best Practices Forum was held from 5th to 7th February, 2023, and was attended by a wide range of stakeholders as outlined above. At the opening session of the BPF, the ECSA-HC Director General, Prof Yoswa Dambisya, drew participants attention to the critical importance of the theme and sub-themes for the Forum, noting that weaknesses in health systems in the region had been markedly exposed by recent disease outbreaks, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. However, he noted that the ongoing collaboration(s) amongst key partners including member state government institutions, development partners, researchers, civil society and other stakeholders, provided hope that the health systems shall be strengthened to effectively respond to future threats. He also emphasized that effective health systems strengthening approaches, including focussing on the six building blocks, needed to incorporate values and principles such as gender inclusivity, transparency, accountability, community engagement and people-centeredness.

The BPF was officially opened by the Principal Secretary (PS), Ministry of Health, Lesotho, Ms Maneo Ntene. In her opening remarks the PS noted that the recent COVID-19 pandemic had negatively affected individuals, communities as well as organizations in the region and worldwide. She noted that the Forum provided a platform to take stock of recent challenges and responses, and to propose policies that may enable the member states and the region respond better to similar outbreaks. She acknowledged the efforts of member states, and appreciated the contributions of partners and ECSA Health Community in tackling COVID 19 outbreak and other health challenges, and urged all to maintain the spirit of cooperation and collective action in the face

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of a common enemy.

The BPF proceeded with plenary and breakout sessions where best practices were presented and deliberated upon by the participants. Highlights of the experiences shared included a presentation by the African Centre for Global Health and Social Transformation (ACHEST) on the successful response to COVID-19 in Uganda through a Community Engagement approach, which involved the creation of village task forces in districts, led by local civic leaders, cultural and religious leaders, women groups and other opinion leaders. These stakeholders met regularly to discuss health matters affecting the community, and the results showed increased coverage of home-based care during the pandemic, reduced incidence of hygiene-related diseases and improved utilization of healthcare services by the communities. The ongoing efforts to strengthen the human capacity development in the region were presented by the Constituent Colleges of the ECSA College of Health Sciences giving a snapshot of their approach, progress and challenges, and there was a submission for the establishment of the ECSA College of Paediatrics and Child Health which received resounding support. The WHO-AFRO made a presentation on the Draft Health Workforce Investment which was very well received and recommended for further consideration by the Ministers.

At the end of the two and half days, the Forum built consensus around a number of recommendations related to the theme and subtheme of the 71st HMC. The BPF requested the 29th DJCC to review and present the recommendations to the 71st HMC for their deliberations and provision of policy guidance to the ECSA-HC member states.

Deliberations of the 71st HMC

The HMC was opened by the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM), Hon Justice Nthomeng Majara, on behalf of the Right Honourable Sam Matekane MP, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Lesotho. In her address, the Guest of Honour reiterated that the theme of the Conference, was timely and appropriate.

She stated that the COVID-19 pandemic challenged health systems globally, regardless of economic status, and that it demonstrated the need to strengthen health systems in the face of any unforeseen health threats. She further emphasized the imperative for countries in the ECSA region to increasingly rely on domestic resources since external funding was uncertain and not sustainable in the long term. Her key message was that the region needed to be on high alert, "... because it was not a question of if, but when the next outbreak would happen...."

The Guest of Honour also made an appeal to all partners to support the Kingdom of Lesotho in her efforts to establish its own medical school, a vision that was previously articulated by the late Right Honourable Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan in his address to the Health Ministers Conference held in the Kingdom of Lesotho in 1976.

Some of the Key outcomes of the 13th Best Practices Forum, as endorsed by the Resolutions, Decisions and Directives of the 71st ECSA Health Ministers Conference

Based on the Recommendations from the BPF, five (5) Resolutions were passed, namely:

- **ECSA/HMC71/R1:** Strengthening health systems for prevention, preparedness, detection of and response to emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases including COVID-19.
- **ECSA/HMC71/R2:** Consolidating Sustainable Local Solutions for Human Resources for Health (HRH)
- **ECSA/HMC71/R3:** Accelerating Interventions and Gender Inclusiveness Towards Better Health Outcomes in RMNCAH
- **ECSA/HMC71/R4:** Innovate Approaches Towards Sustainable Financing of Healthcare
- **ECSA/HMC71/R5:** Application of y implementation research to inform policy and practice in ECSA-Region

The full text of the Resolutions is available at www.ecsahc.org; while Box 1 presents Resolution 2 in full, as an exemplar.

The 71st HMC also established the ECSA College of Pediatrics and Child Health (ECSAPACH).

The ESCA-HC unanimously resolved to support the draft WHO AFRO Health Workforce Investment Charter. Through pronouncement made, the Ministers of the ECSA region were the first regional block to express their support for the draft Charter.

Lessons from the Maseru meetings

ECSA-HC continues to provide an open platform to researchers, civil society and advocacy actors, implementing partners and experts in various fields to freely interact with the decision and policy makers at the highest level. Both the BPF and DJCC were held just prior to the HMC, and the recommendations adopted were largely evidence driven. These Resolutions will influence the focus of activities in the member states and the Secretariat in the near future, and should guide the discussions for partnerships towards implementation of the various priority areas. ECSA-HC was able to demonstrate the bridge between evidence and policy formulation, by fast-tracking evidence informed positions to policy pronouncements and commitments. Political will to support the recommendations was expressed variously during the meetings by the commitment and engagement of the government of the Kingdom of Lesotho, through the participation of Ministers of Health and through the involvement of other government sectors and agencies. The presence of multi-lateral agencies and civil society at the meeting provided hope for a multi-pronged response to the priorities identified during the 13th BPF and 71st HMC.

Box 1: ECSA/HMC71/R2: Consolidating Sustainable Local Solutions for Human Resources for Health (HRH)**The 71st Conference of Health Ministers:**

Cognizant of the critical role of Human Resources for Health (HRH) in ensuring resilient, sustainable and responsive health systems including in pandemic preparedness and response;

Aware of disturbing phenomenon where qualified health workers are not absorbed into the national health systems (both public and private sectors) after completion of training yet the numbers of health workers at the health facilities remain below the WHO recommended standards;

Further aware that trainings in most of the ECSA member states are under the mandate of Ministries responsible for Education and that education services are also undertaken by the private sector who may be driven primarily by the profit motive;

Encouraged that approaches and strategies for sustainable solutions for HRH quality and numbers such as the ECSA collegiate model have been tested and found to work for the region;

Noting with concern the limited Member States' recognition of the ECSA CHS affiliate professional colleges' trainees which delays their registration and practice;

Further aware of the need to improve the quality of paediatric and child health services;

Noting the efforts made by Paediatricians towards establishing the ECSA College of Paediatrics and Child Health;

Concerned about limited responsiveness of the health systems and health care workers to citizens legitimate expectations;

Aware of the limited support provided to health workers wishing to undertake specialization in Dermatology;

Recognizing the ongoing efforts of WHO AFRO in developing the African Health workforce Investment Charter;

Aware that the custodians of medical services and practices are the National health regulatory bodies.

Recalling

- Past resolutions urging the establishment of regional professional colleges for training of specialist health care workers, harmonization of training curricula, mutual intercountry recognition of qualifications (HMC25/R4, HMC26/R8 and HMC62/R5)
- Past resolutions urging the defining of human resource needs and standards of staffing per health service delivery level; development of context specific HRH policies and strategies; incentivizing and motivation of health workers, and human resources information system (HMC40/R3, HMC67/R1 and HMC42/R4)

Noting that progress has been made on the past resolutions, however gaps remain;

Aware that addressing these gaps requires full and accelerated implementation of past resolution.

Now therefore

Approve for the establishment of the ECSA College of Paediatrics and Child Health to operate under the auspices of ECSA College of Health Sciences.

Urges Member States to: -

1. Strengthen the HRH planning and policy by working closely with the respective ministries responsible for education and employment so that respective member states produce optimal numbers of health workers that can be absorbed into established streams, including public health service, private health services, other relevant sectors and labour export as may be appropriate.
2. Support the draft WHO AFRO African Health workforce Investment Charter.
3. Introduce Values Clarification and Attitudes Transformation (VCAT) modules in all health workers pre-service training curricula and in-services training programs to improve health systems responsiveness.
4. Support qualified health workers, including providing scholarships to undertake specialist dermatological training at Regional Centres of Excellence on dermatology and facilitate their proper placement up on completion.
5. Promote co-existence of the collegiate model of training and the traditional academic programmes at universities or similar institutions.
6. Increase investment in paediatrics surgical services including supporting the establishment of Centres of Excellence for paediatric surgery as feasible.

Directs the Secretariat to: -

1. Accelerate the process of facilitating the harmonization of standards for different health professions in the region
2. Facilitate collaboration of ECSA colleges with other professional, regional and national regulatory bodies