Regional Priorities for Equitable and Resilient Health Systems in Eastern, Central, and Southern Africa: Insights from the 76th ECSA-HC Health Ministers Conference

Abstract

Health systems across Africa face persistent challenges, including constrained financing, workforce shortages, recurrent health emergencies, and a growing burden of non-communicable diseases. Strengthening equitable and resilient health systems has therefore become a critical regional priority. The 76th Health Ministers Conference of the East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community held in the Kingdom of Eswatini, provided a regional platform to review progress and identify priorities for strengthening health systems. This paper synthesizes the key themes emerging from the conference discussions and highlights their implications for advancing equitable and resilient health systems in the region. Information presented during plenary sessions, panel discussions, and ministerial statements was reviewed and organized into major thematic areas reflecting shared regional priorities. The conference discussions highlighted several interconnected priorities, including strengthening primary health care and sustainable health financing, improving emergency preparedness, integrating digital health systems, addressing the growing burden of non-communicable diseases, strengthening the health workforce, promoting local manufacturing of health commodities, and reinforcing regional partnerships. Ultimately, the effective implementation of these strategic pillars serves as the essential roadmap for ECSA-HC member states to bridge existing gaps and accelerate progress toward achieving sustainable Universal Health Coverage across the region.

Keywords: Health systems strengthening, Universal Health Coverage, Primary Health Care, regional collaboration, sustainable financing.

Introduction

Health systems across Africa continue to face complex, interconnected challenges, including workforce shortages, fragile supply chains, inequitable access to services, and governance gaps (Obinna, 2024)[(1)]. To address these hurdles, member states must prioritize domestic health financing, strengthen the health workforce, and secure high-level political commitment (Obinna, 2024)[(1)]. This requires a multi-pronged approach to manage the persistent burden of communicable diseases simultaneously, the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and the increasing frequency of public health emergencies (World Health Organization, 2023)[(1)].

The East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC) is a regional intergovernmental organization comprising nine member states: Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Eswatini, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Established to foster collaboration on shared public health challenges, ECSA-HC supports its members through ministerial platforms, technical working groups, and strategic partnerships aimed at improving regional health outcomes (ECSA-HC, 2026).

The 76th ECSA-HC Health Ministers Conference was held from 3rd to 5th February 2026 in Ezulwini, Kingdom of Eswatini, under the theme "Enhancing Health Systems for Equity, Resilience, and Sustainability." The conference convened Ministers of Health, senior government officials, and representatives from regional bodies, development partners, and technical experts. This forum provided a critical platform for reviewing progress in health systems strengthening, sharing cross-border innovations, and identifying priority actions to accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This paper aims to synthesize the key themes emerging from the 76th ECSA-HC Health Ministers Conference and analyze their implications for advancing equitable and resilient health systems in the region.

Methods

The conference was organized using a multi-modal participatory format designed to facilitate policy dialogue, technical exchange, and peer learning. Data sources included conference presentations, ministerial statements, panel discussions, and official meeting documentation.

The conference programme focused on key thematic areas relevant to health system strengthening in the region, including: i) sustainable health financing, ii) health emergency preparedness, iii) digital health integration, iv) reproductive and adolescent health, v) non-communicable diseases, vi) human resources for health, vii) communicable disease control, and viii) local manufacturing of health commodities.

The diverse assembly of Ministers of Health, senior government officials, regional representatives, and technical experts allowed for a broad exchange of perspectives on policy priorities and implementation challenges.

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Data Processing and Analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis approach was used. Key discussion points and policy recommendations were extracted and coded according to thematic categories aligned with health system strengthening domains. Key discussion points, policy recommendations, and ministerial statements were reviewed and extracted from conference materials.

Themes were identified through an iterative review process in which recurring topics and policy priorities across sessions were grouped and synthesized. The analysis focused on identifying cross-cutting challenges, emerging policy directions, and opportunities for strengthening equitable and resilient health systems across the ECSA region.

Ethics

The proceedings are based on publicly shared conference proceedings and institutional documentation. No individual-level or confidential data were collected; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required.

Key themes from the conference

Strengthening primary health care and sustainable health financing

Achieving Universal Health Coverage remains a central priority for ECSA-HC member states. Conference discussions emphasized the importance of strengthening primary health care (PHC) as the foundation for equitable health systems. However, many countries continue to face significant financing constraints, with health expenditure remaining below recommended levels in several countries. Participants emphasized the need to increase domestic resource mobilization, expand health insurance schemes, and improve efficiency in health spending. Strengthening strategic purchasing mechanisms and prioritizing PHC investments were identified as critical strategies for improving service delivery and ensuring the sustainability of health programs.

Strengthening preparedness for health emergencies

Recent outbreaks have demonstrated the importance of resilient health systems capable of responding rapidly to emerging threats. Discussions focused on strengthening preparedness and response capacities for outbreaks such as cholera, mpox, measles, and polio, as well as climate-related health risks. Participants identified persistent gaps in disease surveillance systems, laboratory capacity, and emergency coordination mechanisms. Strengthening national public health institutes, improving cross-border coordination, and adopting One Health approaches were identified as key strategies for enhancing regional preparedness and response capacity.

Strengthening digital health and regional data systems

Fragmented health information systems remain a barrier to effective health system management and disease surveillance. Conference discussions emphasized the need for interoperable and secure digital health systems capable of supporting data-driven decision-making. Participants highlighted the importance of strengthening digital health governance, improving data interoperability, and promoting regional data sharing aligned with international health regulations. Enhanced digital health systems were seen as essential for improving surveillance, supporting early warning systems, and strengthening health system performance.

Improving health outcomes for women, children, and adolescents

The conference highlighted the continued importance of improving reproductive, maternal, neonatal, child, and adolescent health outcomes in the region. Despite progress in several countries, high maternal and neonatal mortality rates and adolescent health vulnerabilities remain significant challenges. Participants emphasized the need to expand youth-friendly health services, strengthen community-based health interventions, and improve access to health information through digital platforms. Multi-sectoral collaboration and school-based health programs were also highlighted as important strategies for improving health outcomes among young populations.

Addressing the growing burden of non-communicable diseases

Non-communicable diseases and mental health conditions are increasing rapidly across the region, placing additional pressure on health systems that have historically focused on communicable diseases. Conference participants emphasized the need to integrate NCD prevention and management into primary health care services and community-based platforms. Preventive interventions, including nutrition policies and community health promotion initiatives, were highlighted as important strategies for addressing the growing burden of chronic diseases.

Strengthening human resources for health

Health workforce shortages remain one of the most significant barriers to improving health system performance in the region. Participants discussed strategies to strengthen workforce capacity through expanded training opportunities, harmonization of regional qualifications, and improved professional regulation. Regional collaboration and workplace-based training programs were identified as promising approaches for strengthening technical capacity and improving workforce retention.

Strengthening response to communicable and Neglected Tropical Diseases

Participants reinforced the importance of regional collaboration in addressing cross-border health challenges, including infectious disease outbreaks, supply chain disruptions, and workforce migration. Participants reported progress in addressing HIV/AIDS, malaria, TB, emerging infections, and NTDs, and shared lessons from South-to-South collaboration, laboratory strengthening, and sustainable financing of elimination programs. They emphasized coordinated, multi-sectoral, and One Health approaches to improve prevention, detection, and response capacity regionally.

Local manufacturing for health security

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains and highlighted the region's dependence on imported health commodities. Conference discussions emphasized the importance of strengthening local manufacturing capacity for pharmaceuticals, diagnostics, and medical supplies. Participants highlighted the need for investments in infrastructure, regulatory harmonization, and technology transfer to support local production and improve regional health security.

Partnerships for resilient health systems

Participants emphasized the critical role of partnerships in strengthening health systems and supporting implementation of the ECSA-HC Strategic Plan (2024–2034). Governments, development partners, research institutions, and civil society organizations all play essential roles in advancing health system reforms. Strengthened collaboration and coordinated action were identified as essential for sustaining progress toward equitable and resilient health systems.

Discussion

The conference discussions highlighted several strategic priorities for strengthening health systems in the region. These discussions provide important insights into policy and programmatic approaches that can support more resilient and sustainable health systems.

Strengthening Partnerships and Regional Collaboration

The conference underscored the importance of partnerships and regional collaboration in strengthening health systems and addressing shared public health challenges. Given that diseases transcend national borders, coordinated regional approaches are essential for effective prevention, surveillance, and response (Nkengasong et al., 2020; WHO, 2023)[1]. Collaboration among Member States, regional institutions, development partners, and academic organizations enhances collective capacity while improving the efficient use of limited resources. Such partnerships reduce duplication of efforts, promote knowledge sharing, and allow countries to adopt successful interventions implemented elsewhere (Frenk & Moon, 2013; Pfeiffer et al., 2018)[1]. In the context of declining external funding and constrained domestic resources, strengthened collaboration remains critical for sustaining progress toward regional health priorities.

Prioritizing Non-Communicable and Communicable Diseases Concurrently

This reflects the epidemiological transition occurring across many African countries, where health systems must simultaneously address infectious disease burdens while responding to rising NCD prevalence, reflecting the dual burden faced by many countries in the region (WHO, 2023; GBD, 2022)[1]. Integrated service delivery approaches such as incorporating NCD screening into HIV or tuberculosis programs, can improve early detection, optimize resource use, and enhance patient-centered care (Rabkin et al., 2020). Such integration ensures that progress in controlling infectious diseases is sustained while also addressing the growing burden of NCDs. Overall, integrated service delivery was recognized as a practical strategy for strengthening health system efficiency in resource-constrained settings.

Prioritizing Local Capacity and Health Security

The conference also highlighted the importance of strengthening local capacity and advancing health security. Expanding local manufacturing of medicines, vaccines, and diagnostics can reduce dependence on global supply chains and improve timely access during emergencies (African Union, 2021; Hill et al., 2021). In addition, building capacity in areas such as technology transfer, workforce development, and regulatory strengthening can enhance preparedness and support sustainable implementation of health programmes (Bates et al., 2020).

Digital Health Governance

Digital transformation is enabling data-driven governance in health systems, supporting more timely decision-making, transparency, and improved service delivery. However, effective digital governance requires more than technology adoption; it depends on robust frameworks for cybersecurity, data privacy, and interoperability to ensure secure and reliable data use (World Health Organization, 2021). A persistent challenge is the fragmentation of digital health solutions, which limits their effectiveness for planning and policy. Integrating digital tools within national health information systems is therefore critical for generating high-quality data, improving efficiency, and strengthening evidence-based decision-making (Bloom et al., 2023; World Bank, 2022).

Limitations

The conference discussions reflect perspectives shared during conference sessions and may not capture the full diversity of experiences across the region. In addition, representation from other sectors and community-level actors may have been limited. Time constraints typical of high-level policy forums also limited deeper exploration of some subject areas.

Conclusion

The ECSA Health Ministers' Conference reaffirmed the importance of coordinated action, innovative approaches, strong governance, and multi-stakeholder partnerships in building equitable, resilient, and sustainable health systems. At the end of the meeting, the Ministers adopted ten resolutions to guide the work of Member States, the ECSA-HC Secretariat, and development partners during the next implementation period. To strengthen accountability and ensure systematic follow-up, the Secretariat will develop a monitoring tool to track progress in implementing these resolutions.

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