Regional Cooperation Is Key to Africa's Health Future

Health threats do not recognize borders. Whether it is a pandemic, a climate-related health emergency, or the silent burden of long-standing diseases, these challenges move faster than national systems can respond. This conviction was reinforced during the 76th Health Ministers' Conference of the East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC), held recently in the Kingdom of Eswatini under the theme, ***Enhancing Health Systems for Equity, Resilience, and Sustainability.*** The conference brought together ministers, policymakers, and partners from across the region, to reflect on the future of health systems in Africa. The discussions reaffirmed that Africa's health security will not be built by countries acting alone, rather, it will depend on stronger regional cooperation, shared leadership, and collective action.

Health threats today move faster and further than ever before. Pandemics, climate-related health emergencies, supply chain disruptions, and workforce shortages regularly cross-national borders. These challenges expose the limits of isolated national responses. In reality, the resilience of one country's health system increasingly depends on the resilience of its neighbours. Health security is therefore only as strong as the weakest system in the chain, and sustainable protection requires countries to plan, learn, and act together.

Regional platforms such as ECSA-HC provide the mechanisms through which this cooperation can take shape, by bringing countries together to share experience, coordinate policies, and strengthen collective preparedness. One of the greatest benefits of regional collaboration is the ability to scale solutions. Across Africa, countries are developing innovative approaches to address common health challenges. When these solutions are shared and adopted across borders, their impact multiplies. Regional cooperation allows countries to move beyond isolated successes and transform them into regional progress.

Yet cooperation alone is not enough. Leadership, both political and technical, is essential to translate shared priorities into practical action. Regional health platforms are most effective when leaders come prepared to align policies, mobilize resources, and champion solutions that benefit the region as a whole. Increasingly, they also serve as important spaces for health diplomacy, allowing African countries to articulate common positions and shape global health discussions in ways that reflect the continent's realities.

At the same time, the gap between commitments and implementation needs to be addressed. Declarations and strategies are important, but they do not save lives. Lives are saved when commitments are translated into functioning systems; when health workers are trained and supported, when innovations reach communities, and when preparedness plans are in place before the next crisis emerges. Encouragingly, there are signs of cross-country progress. Across the region, investments in training programmes, health workforce development, and the scaling of proven health innovations are strengthening systems.

Dr. Ntuli A. Kapologwe

Looking ahead, the choice facing Africa is clear. Countries can either continue addressing health challenges in fragmented ways, or they can strengthen regional collaboration that builds collective resilience and accelerates progress. I hope we choose the later. As we have learned from our leaders, Africa's health future will depend on cooperation, leadership, and implementation. Health challenges may not respect borders, but through stronger regional cooperation, Africa can build systems capable of protecting its people today and for generations to come.

H.E. Jakaya Kikwete, the 4th President of Tanzania (2005–2015)

Dr. Ntuli A. Kapologwe
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Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC): Advancing Africa's Health Security and Sovereignty (AHSS) Agenda

Introduction

On 3rd February 2026, in the Kingdom of Eswatini, I was honored to address the 76th Health Ministerial Conference (HMC) for the East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC), on behalf of His Excellency Dr. Jean Kaseya, Director General of the Africa CDC, where I conveyed Africa CDC's message of solidarity and commitment to strengthening regional health security and collaborative public health initiatives.

The 76th ECSA-HC HMC took place at a critical juncture for Africa's health security, where the decisions we make today will determine the well-being, resilience, and prosperity of the continent's people for generations to come. This year's conference theme, **"Health Systems for Equity, Resilience, and Sustainability,"** is not only timely, but also an urgent and powerful call to action. **Equity means** reaching every community, especially the underserved and hard-to-reach populations. **Resilience means** detecting threats early and responding swiftly and effectively. **Sustainability means** financing and producing more of what we need on the continent, guided by predictable plans that endure well beyond any single health crisis. These pillars provide a roadmap for building stronger, more inclusive, and self-reliant systems.

Allow me also to share the strategic direction and guidance from Africa CDC that will shape and strengthen our health systems for the future. Under the visionary leadership of Dr. Jean Kaseya, Africa CDC is advancing the Africa Health Security and Sovereignty (AHSS) Agenda. The AHSS is a clear *shift from vulnerability to resilience, from dependency to self-reliance, and from fragmented efforts to regional coordination and country ownership*.

Africa must be able to protect Africans at speed and at scale based on evidence, coordination, and shared responsibility. This is a practical necessity; it is not only about response-it is also about the ability to prevent outbreaks, reduce vulnerability, and ensure continuity of essential services. It is about strengthening primary health care, safeguarding supplies, and building a skilled public health and care workforce that can operate across borders.

What does the AHSS agenda mean in practice, especially for the ECSA_HC?

It means institutionalizing stronger preparedness and response; stronger surveillance systems, connected laboratory networks, and establishing public health emergency operations centres (PHEOCs) that can be activated as quickly as possible. Further, it means investing in epidemic intelligence and real-time data use, turning signals into public health events for informed decision-making, and translating those decisions into timely action, so that outbreaks are detected as early as possible and contained swiftly.

It also means Africa cannot accept a future where access to life-saving products is uncertain. Africa must expand its capacity to manufacture vaccines, therapeutics, diagnostics, and other essential health products, this is not as a slogan, but as a significant pillar of Africa's health security and sovereignty. Access is not a privilege, it is a fundamental right, and it must be ensured through systems, markets, and policy decisions that Africa can fully own and control.

To turn this AHSS agenda into measurable results, Africa CDC calls upon African leaders, and Member State to act decisively by championing three priories:

1. Ensure sustainable domestic financing for health security.
2. Faster cross-border detection and data sharing: We call for timely notification, strengthened event-based surveillance, and interoperable data flows that enable rapid verification and action especially in border districts and high-mobility corridors.
3. Regional pooled approaches that strengthen access and local production: We encourage coordinated procurement and market-shaping mechanisms that improve availability and affordability, while enabling local and regional manufacturing to compete, scale, and sustain quality.

Furthermore, we have seen, repeatedly, that excellence can come from anywhere in the world, including Africa. From Ebola to COVID-19, to mpox, Africa has learned hard lessons and built stronger capability. A good example was the discovery of the Omicron COVID 19 variant. This was an African public health success story. *A Zimbabwean born scientist, trained in South Africa, working in Botswana, with equipment provided by Africa CDC though the Pathogen Genomic Initiative (PGI) network established by Africa CDC discovered the omicron variant of COVID-19 in 2024*.

Conclusion

Let me close by emphasizing, as Dr. Jean Kaseya has affirmed, that Africa is not waiting for the future, it is seizing it. Africa is rising toward true self-reliance, increasing the demand of sovereignty in health security, and rising to shape its own destiny. This is not a distant vision it is a present reality unfolding with purpose, resilience, and unwavering determination.

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Leaving no one behind: Every person must access quality health services without financial hardship

Dr. Tembo delivering an opening statement on behalf of the Regional Director for the WHO Africa Region at the 76th ECSA-HC HMC at the Valley Hotel in Eswatini.

The East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC) held its 76th Health Ministers Conference (HMC) at the Valley Hotel, in the Kingdom of Eswatini from the 3rd to the 5th of February 2026. The theme for the conference was ***"Enhancing Health Systems for Equity Resilience and Sustainability"***. I was privileged to join the opening ceremony of this conference to make a statement on behalf of Dr Mohamed Janabi, Regional Director WHO Africa Region. The theme for the 76th HMC was not only timely but strategic as well. Across our region, health needs are evolving, public expectations are rising, and fiscal space is tightening. Yet our collective obligation remains clear: ***to ensure that every person can access quality health services without financial hardship, and that our health systems can withstand shocks while sustaining essential service delivery***.

In the wake of COVID-19, there is renewed understanding; among leaders and the communities they serve, that health and well-being are central to social and economic development. At the same time, the health-related Sustainable Development Goals remain off track. The post-COVID period therefore offers a unique opportunity to accelerate progress on equity, regain momentum on the SDGs, and "future-proof" health systems for a more complex risk landscape. ECSA-HC provides a practical platform to do this through regional solidarity, peer learning, and harmonization of approaches where it adds value.

At the 77th World Health Assembly, Member States endorsed the WHO Fourteenth General Programme of Work, 2025–2028 (GPW14). The GPW14 builds on GPW13's focus on measurable impact in countries and is anchored in the SDG principle of leaving no one behind, guided by commitments to health equity, gender equality, and the right to health. The GPW14 takes forward WHO's pledge to promote, provide, and protect health through six strategic objectives that support action at community, subnational, national, and regional levels.

To promote health, we must respond decisively to climate change and address the determinants of health through cross-sector policies. To provide health, we must advance the Primary Health Care approach, strengthen essential health system capacities for Universal Health Coverage, and expand service coverage and financial protection in ways that reduce inequities. To protect health, we must strengthen all-hazards preparedness and

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Dignitaries from the ECSA-HC conference pay His Excellency King Mswati III a courtesy call at the Lozitha palace

the implementation of the International Health Regulations (IHR, 2005), while ensuring rapid detection and effective response to emergencies.

Recent experience has taught us that health security and health systems strengthening are inseparable. COVID-19, Mpox, and earlier outbreaks such as the West Africa Ebola outbreak (2014-2016) have shown that the same systems that deliver routine services every day must also be capable of identifying risks, detecting outbreaks, and rapidly bringing them under control. Using the same health workforce and financing mechanisms, countries must be able to sustain essential services while responding to shocks - without compromising quality, continuity, or access. This demands an integrated approach that reduces fragmentation and invests in the foundations of resilience.

Reducing fragmentation and strengthening integration will require robust investment in several areas. Countries need evidence-based plans, policies, and legislation that institutionalise recommendations from regional and global bodies and reinforce multisectoral coordination for timely decision-making. They also need stronger information systems and tools that support International Health Regulations implementation, improve clinical care for infectious diseases, and strengthen services for noncommunicable diseases and mental health, alongside reliable logistics and supply chains. In addition, we must ensure that all people, everywhere, can access quality, comprehensive maternal, new-born, child, and adolescent health services.

Delivering results will also require integrated laboratory capacity, strong surveillance networks, and a long-term strategy for resilient infrastructure. Countries need updated health workforce strategies that address training, recruitment, deployment, and retention - including at community level - as well as scalable surge capacities, such as emergency response teams, so systems can expand rapidly when needed.

None of this is possible without sustainable and predictable financing, particularly domestic financing. We must explore new funding models and strengthen efficiency and value for money, because preparedness cannot depend on ad hoc resources mobilized during crises. At the same time, promoting Primary Health Care–based health systems strengthening is the most reliable way to protect the continuum of care and maintain high-quality essential services during emergencies. That requires enough appropriately trained health workers and the allied resources that support them.

WHO stands ready to work with ECSA-HC and all partners to support Member States to build all-hazards capacities anchored in health systems strengthening and resilience. We will continue to support the adoption and implementation of evidence-based legislation, policies, standards, and guidelines that strengthen emergency preparedness and health system performance, and we will support countries to incorporate the latest global guidance into their national contexts. The recently signed Memorandum of Understanding between WHO and ECSA-HC provides an important platform to deepen our cooperation in support of integrated health systems strengthening - so that we can promote, provide, and protect health for all people across ECSA-HC Member States.