Africa: Pathways to Health and Pharmaceutical Sovereignty

David O. Odhiambo gives us an insight into pathways to health and pharmaceutical sovereignty in Africa.



Different types of drugs

From 15th to 16th December 2025, I had the privilege and opportunity to participate in a policy convening hosted by the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) , a UNESCO category 1 Research Institute based in Delhi, India. The convening was hosted in Kampala, Uganda under the theme: **"Peace as the Foundation for Well-being and Sustainability in Africa."** This was an opportunity for the organization to convene stakeholders in the healthcare sector to assess the continental healthcare landscape, the intersection with peace and the need for structured interventions to deliver positive healthcare outcomes as a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence, wellbeing and sustainability in Africa.

Drawing on my work leading the African Pharmaceutical Network (APN) – a pan-African platform that works to strengthen Africa's pharmaceutical ecosystem through workforce development, business ecosystem support services and policy advocacy, I presented on the pathways to health and pharmaceutical sovereignty in Africa. This came at an opportune moment considering the developments that were taking shape in the industry from operationalization of the African Medicines Agency (AMA) to establishment of the African Pooled Procurement Mechanism (APPM) by the Africa CDC with commitment to strengthen local manufacturing.

Dr. David O. Odhiambo, Executive Director – African Pharmaceutical Network (APN), david.odhiambo@africanpharmanetwork.net

Health Sovereignty is the ability of nations to finance, produce, and govern their own health systems and countermeasures. Pharmaceutical sovereignty is the ability of nations to control their own health technologies ensuring reliable access to essential medicines, vaccines and diagnostics by building domestic research and development (R&D) and manufacturing, reducing reliance on foreign supply chains, and asserting control over health policies. Pharmaceutical sovereignty is especially vital during global health crises to counter supply chain fragilities as were witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is critical that when we discuss health and pharmaceutical sovereignty, we put to context the human lives and livelihoods behind the numbers. With a population of approx. 1.3 billion, the continent imports between 70 – 90% of its pharmaceutical needs. For vaccines the continent produces less that 1%. These statistics point to an over-levered pharmaceutical system where external dependence exposes our people to risks which must be contended with. With growing risk of outbreaks in the continent, unless pragmatic solutions are designed to safeguard the pharmaceutical supply chain systems in the continent, the level of exposure in the event of an outbreak of public health interest arises will be catastrophic.

In my presentation I painted a picture of the landscape with focus on appreciating the reality of our circumstances and aiming to transform the narrative. The below table outlines some of the data on the current healthcare and pharmaceutical landscape in Africa.

Focus Area	Current Status
Disease Burden	• Africa has the highest burden of disease globally – 25% of global disease burden. • Infectious/communicable diseases account for approx. 60% of disease burden. • Growing burden of non-communicable diseases – approx. 40%. • Growing threat of disease outbreaks.
Healthcare Financing	• Poverty is a critical challenge with affordability of healthcare compromised. • Government budgets below 15% - Abuja Declaration. • Out of pocket financing predominant with insurance averaging 20%.
Health Workforce	• Africa currently has approx. 3% of global health workforce. • Africa is a net exporter of healthcare workers. • Underemployment or unemployment of healthcare workers a key challenge. • There are skills gaps in different segments of the healthcare impeding service delivery.
Data & Information	• Weak health information management systems (HIMS). • Data gaps in actual healthcare landscape to inform interventions. • Parallel health programmes which compromise continuity of care.
Medical Products, Vaccines & Technologies	• Africa imports more than 70% of medical products and technologies. Limited local manufacturing capacity. • Out of stock situation is a perennial problem in public health facilities with most patients purchasing products in the private market. • Quality of health products and technologies is compromised with substantial burden of substandard, counterfeit and falsified medicines. • Disjointed and weak regulatory systems for oversight of distribution and supply chain systems in the continent.
Multi-sectoral Approach	• There is a growing appreciation of multi-sectoral approach and public-private partnerships as an enabler for health & pharmaceutical sovereignty in Africa. • Mechanisms and frameworks for multisectoral collaborations and PPPs are nascent. • Limited number of bankable projects for effective PPPs in the continent. • Limited economic/financial muscle in the continent affects viability of private ventures serving as a deterrent for private investments.

Cognizant of these dynamics, there's need for structured and contextually sound interventions anchored on strengthening pharmaceutical systems in the continent. There is need for work to address key ecosystem hurdles and challenges in the continent with focus on:

- Workforce development - the growth of the industry is predicated on competent, skill and meaningfully engaged talent in the ecosystem. It's therefore imperative to invest in the right skills aligned with developmental priorities and industry needs. The African Pharmaceutical Network (APN) through the African Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Sciences Training Institute works to close this gap in collaboration with international organizations and pharmaceutical industries to deliver relevant training for the right skill needed by the industry.
- Economic incentives and ecosystem support services to attract investments into the industry. These range from technical support in maneuvering the regulatory landscape, understanding the market dynamics, optimizing reimbursement channels for products introduced in the market and enabling partnerships with ecosystem parts across the ecosystem. Through Ryculture Health and Social Innovation, the APN works to deliver bespoke advisory support services for players working in or venturing into the African pharmaceutical markets.



Female pharmacist working drugstore

[1]UNESCO MGIEP: https://mgiep.unesco.org/
[2]African Pharmaceutical Network (APN): https://africanpharmanetwork.net/
[3]African Medicines Agency (AMA): https://au-ama.africa/
[4]African Pooled Procurement Mechanism (APPM): https://africacdc.org/appm/