From Best Practices to Action: Reflections from the 16th ECSA-HC Best Practices Forum

The 16th ECSA-HC Best Practices Forum and 32nd Directors Joint Consultative Committee Meeting took place in Manzini, Kingdom of Eswatini, from 5–7 August 2026, following three days of pre-conference activities from 2–4 August. Held under the theme, "***Shaping the Future of Health in the ECSA Region: Advancing Health Security, Innovation and Sustainability***," the Forum brought together policymakers, researchers, health professionals, innovators and development partners from across East, Central and Southern Africa.

The Forum provided an important platform for countries and institutions to exchange knowledge, showcase innovations and share practical experiences in strengthening health systems. A recurring message was the importance of working beyond institutional and sectoral silos. Participants explored how regional collaboration, cross-border partnerships, innovation and sharing of best practices can strengthen health systems and improve preparedness for emerging health threats.

The discussions covered a broad range of issues, including health security, health-system resilience, innovation, sustainability, human resources for health, knowledge and evidence sharing, and regional collaboration. Importantly, the emphasis was not simply on identifying promising practices, but on understanding how they can be adapted, scaled and translated into sustainable improvements in health services.

Representing the African Centre for Global Health and Social Transformation (ACHEST), Executive Director Dr. David Okello participated as a keynote speaker in a plenary session on Human Resources for Health (HRH). His presentation highlighted a persistent contradiction facing African health systems: countries continue to experience serious shortages of health workers, while many trained professionals remain unemployed or underemployed.

For many years, the African health workforce debate has focused predominantly on brain drain—the migration of doctors, nurses, midwives and other health professionals in search of better employment opportunities and working conditions. While this remains an important concern, Dr. Okello challenged participants to consider a related phenomenon: brain waste.

The paradox is striking. Africa needs more health workers, yet in some countries trained professionals cannot find employment. Governments face limited fiscal space, constrained public-sector wage bills and recruitment restrictions, while the rapid expansion of health-professional training, particularly in the private sector, is not always sufficiently linked to national workforce requirements or employment opportunities.

This raises a fundamental question: Is Africa facing only a shortage of health workers, or also a failure to adequately plan, finance and absorb the workforce it is producing?

Dr. Okello argued for a more integrated approach linking health-workforce planning, training, financing, employment and retention. His central message was captured in four words: Plan. Train. Employ. Retain.

The message was particularly timely in the context of the emerging Africa Health Workforce Agenda 2026–2035, which places stronger emphasis on planning, educating, employing and retaining the health workforce needed to meet Africa's health needs. The challenge now is to ensure that such continental commitments translate into action at country and institutional levels.

This also reflects one of the broader lessons of the ECSA-HC Forum: best practices have value only when translated into implementation and results. Africa has no shortage of policies, strategies, resolutions and innovative ideas. The more difficult task is creating the financing, institutional arrangements, accountability mechanisms and partnerships required to put them into practice.

For the health workforce, this means ensuring that training institutions produce the right numbers and mix of professionals, with competencies aligned to health-system needs; governments and partners create and finance employment opportunities; health workers are equitably deployed; and working environments support professional growth and retention.

It also requires health, education, finance, labour and public-service sectors to work together rather than addressing workforce challenges independently. Training institutions, governments and the private sector all have a role in ensuring that investments in health-professional education translate into a workforce available where and when populations need it.

The discussions at the 16th ECSA-HC Best Practices Forum therefore reinforced an important principle: the future of African health systems will depend not only on the innovations we generate, but on our ability to take what works, adapt it to local realities, finance it and implement it at scale.

For the health workforce, this means moving from commitments to implementation, from boardrooms to workplaces, and from best practices to measurable health outcomes.

Plan. Train. Employ. Retain. This is more than a workforce slogan. It is a practical framework for turning Africa's investments in health education and human capital into stronger health systems, greater health security and better access to quality health care.

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