From Innovation to Impact: Reflections from the 9th AFREhealth Annual Conference

The 9th AFREhealth Conference concluded in Kampala at Munyonyo on Wednesday, 26 August 2026. I was honoured to receive a plaque of appreciation on behalf of African Centre for Global Health and Social Transformation (ACHEST), recognising the organisation as one of the conference sponsors.

For ACHEST, this was more than an opportunity to support another important African health meeting. It was also a moment to reflect on an initiative to which the organisation has contributed from its formative years.

ACHEST played an important role in the creation and early development of AFREhealth. One of its past presidents, Dr. Elsie Kiguli-Malwadde, of ACHEST, helped mobilise support from partners and provided leadership that helped steer AFREhealth through its early years. Her contribution, together with that of many colleagues and institutions across Africa, helped establish a platform that has grown into an important continental network for advancing health professions education, research and service delivery.

AFREhealth now brings together universities and health training institutions across Africa committed to strengthening these areas. The theme of this year's conference, "From Innovation to Impact: Strengthening Health Education, Research, and Service Delivery for a Resilient Africa," was therefore both timely and thought-provoking.

After three days of stimulating presentations, discussions and exchanges, I came away with two reflections that stayed with me.

First, Africa has no shortage of innovative research. Our universities and research institutions are generating impressive knowledge. African researchers are addressing some of the continent's most important health challenges, and much of this work is finding its way into reputable peer-reviewed journals.

But we must ask a more difficult question: *How much of this knowledge is actually changing the lives of ordinary people?* Too often, the journey appears to end with publication. Evidence may be generated and disseminated, but does not always find its way into policy, clinical practice, community programmes or health-system decisions. The result is a persistent gap between what we know and what we do.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply to produce more research. We must become much better at translating evidence into action and action into measurable health outcomes. Universities need stronger links with governments, health facilities, communities and policymakers so that research responds to real-world problems and its findings are deliberately taken to scale.

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Second, we are training increasing numbers of health professionals, yet many are not finding their way quickly enough to the communities and health facilities where they are most needed.

This raises another important question: *Are we training the right number and mix of health workers for the needs of our populations?*

The expansion of health professional training, particularly in the private sector, can be driven by legitimate demand but also by institutional incentives to expand enrolment. Training, however, cannot be an end in itself. A qualified health professional who cannot find employment, or whose skills are not deployed where they are needed, represents a loss not only to the individual but also to society.

Africa therefore needs stronger alignment between health workforce planning, training, financing and employment. We should not simply ask how many health workers our institutions can train. We should ask how many are needed, what skills are required, where they are needed, how they will be financed and how they can be retained.

The principle should be simple: ***Plan. Train. Employ. Retain***.

These challenges are not the responsibility of universities alone. They require governments, health professional councils, training institutions, employers, development partners, researchers and communities to work together. AFREhealth provides an important platform for precisely this kind of collaboration.

For me, this is where the conference theme becomes particularly powerful. "From Innovation to Impact" should challenge us to move beyond celebrating what we have created to demonstrating what difference it makes. Africa has demonstrated that it can generate knowledge, develop innovative solutions and train health professionals. The next step is to ensure that these investments translate into stronger health systems and healthier communities.

This is also why organisations such as ACHEST value platforms like AFREhealth. Our contribution to its early development reflected a belief that Africa needs institutions and networks capable of connecting knowledge, people and action across the continent.

The future of African health will depend not only on how much knowledge we generate or how many professionals we train, but on how effectively we translate knowledge into practice and training into service. The ultimate measure of innovation is not the novelty of the idea, the number of graduates produced, or the number of papers published. It is whether lives are improved.

That, for me, is what "***From Innovation to Impact***" should ultimately mean