



## First International Conference on Public Health in Africa Closes With Urgent Call for a New Public Health Order

**16 December 2021 | Addis Ababa** - The first international [Conference on Public Health in Africa](#) (CPHIA 2021), hosted by the African Union (AU) and Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) concluded its [main programme](#) today following three days of sessions focused on the need to address long-standing health challenges on the continent, including vaccine inequity and weak health systems. Over 140 African policymakers, scientists, public health experts, data experts, and civil society representatives presented the latest learnings and research from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the actions needed to better guard against current and future health crises.

During the opening ceremony, speakers reflected on the impact of COVID-19 in Africa over the past two years and lessons learnt.

“The inaugural Conference on Public Health in Africa is happening at an important time in history,” said Chairperson of the AU Commission H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat. “The African continent has not been spared the devastating effects of COVID-19, pushing our health systems to the limits. But we have great hopes for the future, and a historic opportunity to build a New Public Health Order that can effectively guard against future health crises. This conference is the first step in making this a reality.”

The AU’s New Public Health Order calls for continental collaboration to bolster African manufacturing capacity for vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics; strengthen public health institutions for people-centred care; expand the public health workforce; establish respectful, action-oriented partnerships; and engage with the private sector. These pillars are part of the continent’s approach to meeting the aspirations of the [Agenda 2063 - the Africa We Want](#).

“There is a need for renewed commitments by governments and national parliaments to increase domestic financing for health in Africa. This has been a priority of the African Union for several years, but progress has not been fast enough. We cannot continue to rely on external funding for something so important to our future,” said H.E. Paul Kagame, President of Rwanda and AU Champion for Domestic Health Financing. “We need to invest much more in national health systems. The ability to implement critical health programmes, including regular mass vaccination campaigns depends on the quality of national health services and the trust the public have in them.”

“Maybe the Ebola outbreak of 2014 to 2016 was a call to action that something bigger was to come. And maybe COVID-19 is the signal that something even bigger will come. So, we must be prepared and take our health security destiny into our own hands,” said Dr. John Nkengasong, Director of the Africa CDC. “It

means we have to fight the next pandemic in a way that is unparalleled to the way we are fighting this pandemic, and I am very convinced that we will do that given the mobilization, commitment and investments that are currently going on.”

## **COVID-19 Epidemiology**

The opening ceremony was followed by a plenary discussion on the epidemiology of SARS-COV-2. This included a presentation by Prof. Salim Abdool Karim, Director of the Center for the AIDS Program of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA), who is among those leading research into the Omicron variant. Explaining the variant’s trajectory in South Africa, he emphasized the need to continue trusting and implementing strong public health interventions.

“There is no need to panic. We’ve dealt with variants before, including those with immune escape. Closing borders has almost no benefit. Public health systems work, public interventions like masks and social distancing work. Let’s use them,” said Prof. Karim.

Other presenters featured included Prof. Penny Moore, Virologist, University of Witwatersrand, and Prof. Ibrahim Abubakar, Dean, Faculty of Population Health Sciences, University College London.

“Real time phenotypic assessments of emerging variants in Africa is essential, particularly in the continuing context of under vaccination and in some places high levels of HIV. The rapid pivot of SARS-Cov-2 was enabled by strong existing platforms and collaborations, most of which have been developed over 20 years,” Prof. Moore.

“We need greater investment in health systems and national economies. It’s only through that, that people will not ban us when we detect new variants, while not giving us access to the relevant technologies,” Prof. Abubakar.

## **Impact on Health Systems & Access to Therapeutics**

Day two of CPHIA 2021 put a spotlight on COVID-19’s impact on vaccination and health systems in Africa, with speakers addressing lessons learned from implementation of health policies and systems, as well as the latest in COVID-19 vaccine research and manufacturing capacity. One of the sessions featured remarks from Prof. Petro Terblanche, Managing director at Afrigen Biologics, which is based in South Africa and part of the first COVID-19 mRNA vaccine technology transfer hub.

“I have immense support for waivers and other instruments to give us access to vaccine Intellectual Property,” said Prof. Terblanche. “Intellectual Property should not be a barrier, it should be an enabler and, when needed, it must be made accessible to benefit the public. We need voluntary licenses to exercise our freedom to operate in low and middle income countries. Working with partners, we can ensure that voluntary licensing remains at the top of every vaccine manufacturing discussion.”

A special session on day two focused on recent advances in the development of oral drugs for COVID-19. Oral therapeutics for COVID-19 remain a key part of the response to the pandemic.

"We are blessed that science is on our side, and we have these innovative countermeasures like vaccines, diagnostics, antivirals, and immunologics. However, I'm not sure that society has caught up and that presents us with incredible inequities. We have to stare at the global social determinants of health in the face to move the needle on health equity," said Dr. Julie Louise Gerberding, MD, MPH, Chief Patient Officer and Executive Vice President, Merck.

### **Health System Preparedness, Whole Society Approaches & Digital Solutions**

On day three, speakers spoke about the state of Africa's preparedness for tackling COVID-19 and other public health emergencies, as well as digital solutions to support an effective public health response. During the final plenary, presenters focused on how to adapt a cross-sector approach to achieving Agenda 2063.

The CPHIA 2021 Awards were presented during the closing ceremony to distinguished healthcare professionals as a recognition of their contributions to science, research and development in Africa. The Lifetime Achievement in Public Health Award was given to Professor Salim Abdool Karim, Director, CAPRISA, and Professor Jean-Jacques Muyembe-Tamfum, General Director, National Institute of Biomedical Research and Professor of Medical Virology at the University of Kinshasa. The CPHIA 2021 co-chairs Professor Senait Fisseha, Director of Global Programs at The Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation and Professor Agnes Binagwaho, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Global Health Equity, each received an award for Achievement in Global Health Leadership. Following this year's success, organisers announced plans for the next CPHIA to be hosted in Rwanda, 13-15 December 2022.

For additional information, please visit [www.cphia2021.com](http://www.cphia2021.com).

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**About Africa CDC**

Africa CDC is a specialized technical institution of the African Union which supports Member States in their efforts to strengthen health systems and improve surveillance, emergency response, prevention and control of diseases. Learn more at: <http://www.africacdc.org>

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