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Strengthening community systems: Africa Christian Health Associations Platform's Epidemic-Ready Approach

How communities get prepared to better manage future pandemics

Von Ruth Gemi, Simon Ssentongo und Nkatha Njeru

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of communities as foundational bedrock for dealing with public health emergencies. Countries need to regularly assess their operational readiness of preparedness activities, especially at the community level to detect and respond to outbreaks of epidemic and pandemic potential more effectively (WHO 2024).



Healthcare workers training on HEP in Sierra Leone. Photo: @ Paul Brima CHASL

Community engagement plays a pivotal role in controlling disease outbreaks and mitigating natural disasters. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of elevating community engagement to build equity, trust, and sustained action in future health promotion preparedness strategies. Strengthening community action through relevant education, communication strategies, and empowering community leaders is essential. Lessons drawn from the pandemic highlight the significance of pre-planning, adapting to changing contexts, and acknowledging historical context. (Corbin et al., 2021).

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ACHAP's investment in building capacity of healthcare workers, community health workers, and faith/religious leaders in Health Emergency Preparedness and Response (HEP)

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Africa Christian Health Associations Platform (ACHAP) has taken significant strides to strengthen community preparedness and resilience. Through a comprehensive situation analysis, ACHAP identified influential structures within communities that were underutilized but had the potential to reach and influence other community members, even in the most remote areas, drawing lessons from the pandemic, which was rife with myths, misconceptions, disinformation, and misinformation.

ACHAP's approach centers on empowering its member Christian Health Associations, and key stakeholders within communities which include community health workers, healthcare workers, faith/religious leaders, and other key stakeholders.



HEP training for member CHAs and ACHAP staff. Photo: @ Dennis-ACHAP

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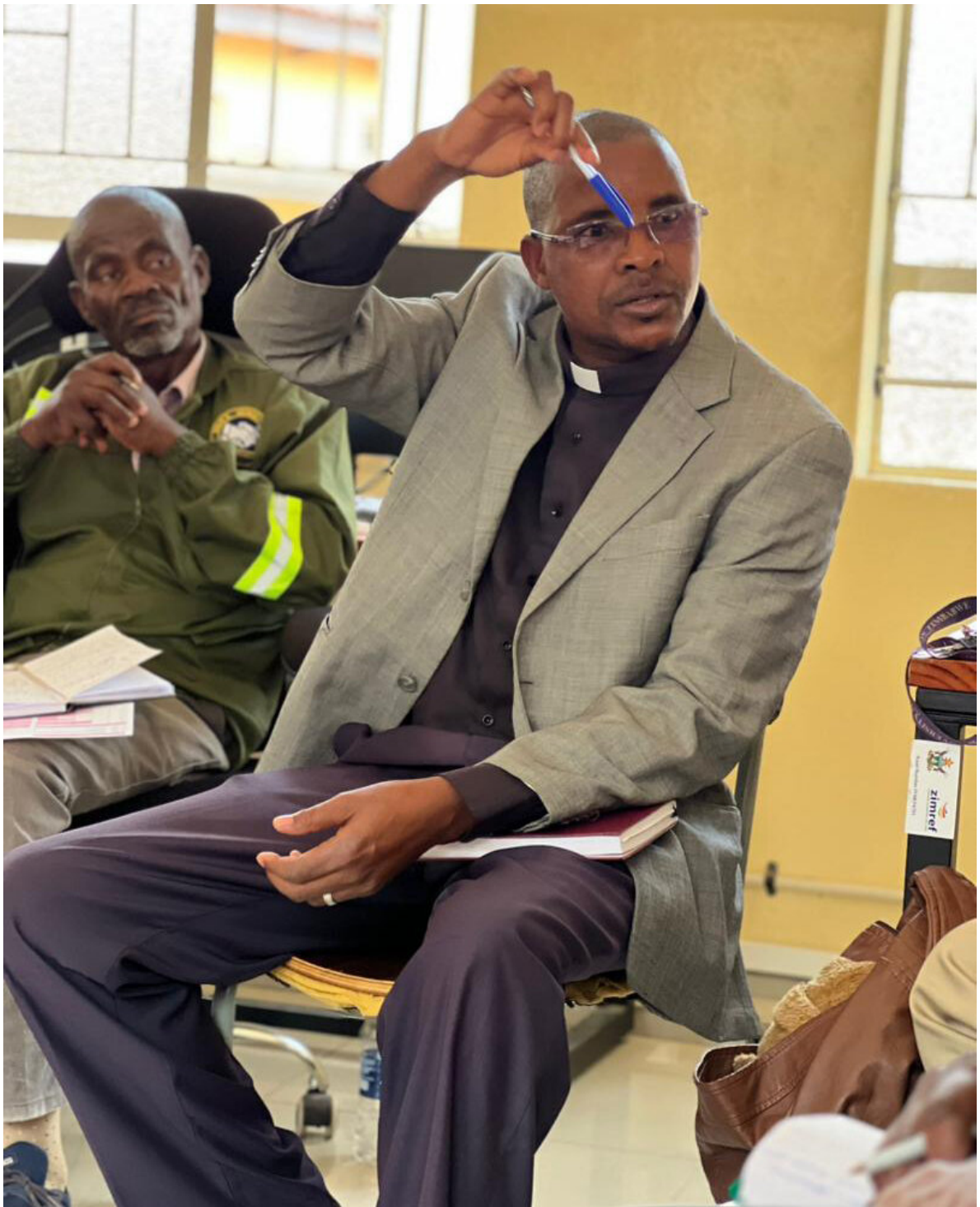
ACHAP commenced the Health emergency preparedness and response capacity building by training eight ACHAP member Christian Health Association participants from across eight countries namely; Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Liberia, Central African Republic, Madagascar, Ivory Coast and Zambia who were implementing the ACHAP COVID-19 vaccination program. Some of the topics included Epidemiologic Response to Emergencies, Emergency Response Rapid Needs Assessment and Action Planning and overview of Disaster-related Morbidity and Mortality Surveillance. These modules were selected to enhance the transfer of skills and knowledge in line with the World Health Organization and internationally recommended practices on Health Emergency preparedness and Response.

Healthcare Workers: ACHAP partnered with Ecumenical Pharmaceutical Network and conducted a comprehensive training for 194 healthcare workers in eight countries which included Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Liberia, Central African Republic, Madagascar, Ivory Coast and Zambia. The training, which was both virtual and in-person for countries facing internet connectivity challenges, provided essential knowledge on health emergency preparedness and response, equipping these frontline heroes to tackle health crises effectively. See Course: ENGLISH, FRENCH



Screenshot of the EPN learning platform

Faith/Religious Leaders: Recognizing the influential role of faith/religious leaders, ACHAP trained 75 faith leaders from two countries; that is to say 45 in Sierra Leone and 30 from Zimbabwe on Health Emergency Preparedness and Response. These leaders now play a crucial part in disseminating accurate health information and promoting preventive measures within their congregations. As of March 2024, the trained faith/religious leaders have reached out to approximately 280,000 individuals within their communities/congregations.



Pastor Hwingwiri from Zimbabwe one of the beneficiaries of HEP training. Photo: @Shamiso ZACH

Community Health Workers: ACHAP also invested in community health workers, recognizing their pivotal role in reaching vulnerable populations. By imparting fundamental knowledge in over 200 Community Health Workers, ACHAP ensured that these workers are well-prepared to respond during emergencies.

ACHAP engages in dialogues with communities, specifically targeting CORPS (Community-Owned Resource Persons), Faith leaders, and other key influential/opinion leaders. These discussions aim to assess community preparedness in responding to disasters.

As we navigate the complexities of public health, ACHAP's unwavering dedication to community well-being stands as a beacon of hope. Together, we can create epidemic-ready communities that thrive even in the face of adversity.

Some communities have remained hesitant, believing that health emergencies are government initiatives to secure funds from the Western world.

Challenges experienced by ACHAP

- ACHAP aimed to extend its Health Emergency Preparedness Capacity Building initiatives to more communities and community structures. However, this effort has been constrained by limited resources.
- Some communities have remained hesitant, believing that health emergencies are government initiatives to secure funds from the Western world. However, ACHAP has made extra efforts to continuously create awareness and build the capacity of these communities.

What differences have the trainings made compared to before?

- The trainings have fostered collaboration among community structures such as Faith/Religious leaders, health facilities, and the District Health Management Teams. Effective teamwork ensures a coordinated response during emergencies.
- The trainings have created awareness and knowledge. Community members have gained awareness about potential health emergencies, their causes, and preventive measures. The trainings have equipped the different teams with essential skills.

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ACHAP, a regional faith-based organization, serves as a vital platform for advocacy, networking, and capacity building for Christian Health Associations (CHAs) and Church Health Networks across Sub-Saharan Africa.

References

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Ruth Gemi is Public Health practitioner, Strong clinical and environmental Health background with experience of more than eight years in TB/HIV programming, Adolescent Sexual & Reproductive Health, Maternal Newborn and Child Health, WASH and Nutrition programming. Broad-ranging experience working with non-profit organizations, including Faith-Based Organizations in Humanitarian/Health emergency response and development operations, Health Systems Strengthening, leadership, organizational, and advocacy skills with a clear understanding of program/project delivery. She currently serves as a programme Management Advisor at the Africa Christian Health Associations Platform. Email



Simon Ssentongo currently works as Knowledge Management and Learning Advisor at ACHAP. With a passion for driving positive change through evidence-based decision-making, Simon is a seasoned professional in the field of Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL). With a background in Biostatistics, he has dedicated his career to ensuring that organizations and projects not only meet their objectives but continuously learn and adapt for sustained impact. Looking ahead, Simon envisions a future where MEL becomes an integral part of every development initiative. Email



Nkatha Njeru, MPH is an experienced public health professional who has worked with the faith sector in Kenya and regionally for the past 17 years. She has extensive experience in health systems strengthening where she has worked to support non-profit organizations (especially faith-based sector) in organizational capacity development, Policy formulation, strategic planning, human resources for health, as well as health financing. She is experienced in project design, coordination and management, having provided project leadership and oversight for funding from various donor agencies and governments. She is the Chief Executive Officer/team leader for the Africa Christian health Associations Platform (ACHAP), an umbrella organization for Christian health

Associations (CHAS) with membership in more than 30 African Countries whose mandate is to support health care systems of CHA members. Email

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