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POLICY BRIEF

REDEFINING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN HEALTH:

The Africa CDC Strategy for Youth Engagement
and Participation in Global Health

Ms. Kerigo Odada, LLM, Mr Ibraheem Sanusi, Ms. Metasebiya Ayele

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Africa's public health governance architecture rapidly evolves, so does advocacy for more meaningful ways of engaging young people.

Presently, calls for Africa to embrace transformative leadership that prioritises its most crucial resource, the youth, have increased as young people rally together to work for the Africa they want. Across the continent, the youth are challenging pre-existing barriers that have historically limited their participation in public health and are organising in their diversities to effect change. Members of this demographic, who are approximately 65% of the total population on the continent, are redefining their engagement with various systems of governance, including public health and are steadfast in their resolve to move beyond tokenisation to co-creation and co-ownership. Africa's youth want a conducive environment to complement and elevate the innovative ideas they are implementing in their immediate environments and communities. It is, therefore, imperative that investments are made to strengthen and facilitate the participation of young people in Africa's public health policy development and implementation. Strengthening the role the youth play in Africa's public health governance is an integral pillar of Africa's mission to realise The New Public Health Order (NPHO) for the continent.¹

Key conclusions:

- There is a need to mainstream meaningful youth engagement within Africa's public health governance architecture.
- Multisectoral and multistakeholder partnerships must be promoted and strengthened for Africa's public health systems to be responsive and sustainable.
- Africa must invest in building and strengthening its young public health workforce.
- Africa must invest in sustainable health financing systems, particularly at the domestic level, to reduce donor dependence.
- The future of public health in Africa is highly dependent on digital innovation and technological advancements.

Recommendations

- **To the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC):**

Put in place the necessary organisational and operational support for full implementation of the Africa CDC Strategy for Youth Engagement and Participation in Global Health by the, including human resources and financing. Ensure that all divisions and centres of the Africa CDC also mainstream the youth strategy in their respective programming.

- **To Member States**

Replicate and create structures that promote youth engagement at regional, national, and subnational levels, including annual convenings, youth advisory teams and national youth engagement strategies.

- **To Partners**

Support the full implementation of the Africa CDC Strategy for Youth Engagement and Participation in Global Health (YES! Health) by scaling up the investment in nurturing a new generation of public health experts and professionals.

- **To African Youth**

Move from participation to action: Start immediately by taking charge of own environment and communities and drive health solutions which are context specific, socially responsible and accountable.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic threw the world into a global health emergency that tested the stability of many public health systems across the globe. During this period, countries grappled with a health crisis that exposed the inadequacies of most of their public health systems, which were, at the time, overwhelmed by the effects of the pandemic.

Like many parts of the world, the pandemic equally tested Africa's public health system and governance architecture.² The effects of COVID-19 overwhelmed many countries on the continent, exposing the structural shortcomings in Africa's public health system. This was an awakening that forced the world to come to terms with the importance of a robust public health systems that promotes global health security and preparedness transcending borders and geographic locations.³

With the continent's public health future at risk and the attendant challenges presented by limited access to vaccines, African countries found themselves at a point of reckoning that required them to look internally for a solution. The continent could no longer afford to maintain its traditional approach to public health, which was typically exclusionary and characterised by overreliance on foreign aid. It was time for African countries to adopt new and innovative ways of tackling their public health issues, including enhancing local manufacturing capabilities, digital health technologies, and the active engagement of youth in public health management.

STRENGTHENING YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA'S PUBLIC HEALTH SECTOR

For the African Union and Africa CDC, in particular, engaging Africa's youth in efforts geared towards tackling the COVID-19 pandemic was a key focus. In recognition of the fundamental role young people play in tackling Africa's public health challenges, the organisations launched the African Union COVID-19 Vaccination Bingwa Initiative, which worked with African youth to champion the uptake of the COVID-19 vaccines through community mobilisation.⁴

Launched in 2022, the initiative mobilised volunteers between the ages of 18 and 35 years to advocate for increased uptake of COVID-19 vaccinations to reach at least one hundred million individuals. The Bingwas, as they are popularly referred to, are young people with experience in community or youth engagement and have professional experience in public health.⁵ Thus far, they have benefitted from capacity-building programs that have strengthened their skills in community mobilisation and public health initiatives that combine advocacy and service delivery. They have contributed to the uptake of COVID-19 vaccines in Africa, and it is envisioned that their role in public health initiatives will continue to evolve to meet the contextual realities of the continent.

Beyond the Bingwa Initiative, Africa CDC has continued to strengthen the role of youth in Africa's public health governance architecture through other initiatives such as its annual Youth Pre-Conference. Together with partners, like Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH Office to the African Union (GIZ-AU), the organisation has convened two Africa CDC Youth Pre-Conferences in 2022 and 2023 on the margins of the Second and Third International Conference on Public Health in Africa (CPHIA 2022 and CPHIA 2023).⁶ Under the themes, **"Meaningful youth engagement for advancing sustainable health security in Africa"** and **'Youth**

Leadership for A Safer and Healthier Africa', YPC 2022 and 2023, respectively, brought together African youth from across the continent and the diaspora to discuss and shape Africa's public health future in various ways.⁷

During the most recent YPC, for example, over 3,247 applications were received from Africa and the diaspora and 250 participants were selected to represent 48 countries. Over the course of the two-day conference, participants engaged with 39 speakers in 4 plenary and 5 parallel sessions. The event also featured 7 poster presentations and a case competition that produced 13 potential initiatives on digital health, local pharmaceutical manufacturing, climate change, mental health, and anti-microbial resistance (AMR).

Both conferences have thus far been successful, with the first YPC resulting in the establishment of the Youth Advisory Team for Health (YAT4H). The YAT4H was established as one of the steps towards fostering co-creation and co-ownership with young people on issues concerning public health in Africa. YAT4H represents African youth within the Africa CDC and facilitates the inclusion of young people's voices in Africa CDC strategies and initiatives. The establishment of this team is meant to move youth participation in public health governance beyond tokenism

and hopefully result in the institutionalisation of youth engagement within the Africa CDC on matters of public health in Africa.

The second YPC, on the other hand, served as a co-creation opportunity for Africa CDC YES! Health.⁸ The Africa CDC YES! Health, co-created with the 250 youth delegates at the YPC 2023, aims to integrate youth participation within Africa CDC. Youth delegates attending the pre-conference, representing African youth in their diversities, were able to co-design and co-create a strategy that would strengthen youth leadership in Africa's public health sector and institutionalise a mechanism of working with the Africa CDC, specifically in the development and implementation of the NPHO.

The Strategy development process entailed two additional consultation sessions. A virtual survey was conducted from December 2023 to January 2024 to get more input from young people on their views regarding mainstreaming youth engagement within the Africa CDC. **Through this survey, 271 young people provided feedback on challenges faced by young people in Africa and innovative ideas and recommendations for addressing said issues.** In February 2024, the Africa CDC convened an additional consultation workshop at Africa CDC Headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.⁹ The workshop was attended by members of the YAT4H, young public health experts, representatives from various divisions of the Africa CDC and international partners like GIZ, who expressed their support for the strategy. Through this workshop, the Africa CDC was able to collect feedback and refine the draft strategy to ensure its alignment with young people's needs and Africa CDC priorities.

Evidence shows that the youth in Africa are a reservoir of expertise and competence that should be marshalled to drive the local manufacturing, community health workforce, and digital health innovations, amongst others.¹⁰ However, more needs to be done to support and facilitate the participation of young people in efforts focused on addressing complex public health issues in Africa.¹¹ African Union member states must adopt a strategic approach to working with young people, and this must involve not only creating an enabling policy environment but also investing sufficient resources needed to increase the involvement of young people.

SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE AROUND YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC HEALTH IN AFRICA: SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE CONTINENT

Despite the structural and social barriers that have made it challenging for a number of young people in Africa to maximise their full potential, the youth have made several notable achievements across the continent in public health. Take, for example, Alain Nteff, who, at 23 years of age, co-founded Gifted Mom, a mobile health platform that uses low-cost technology to help mothers and pregnant women access medical advice in rural communities in Cameroon.¹²

Nteff and co-founders developed Gifted Mom to help reduce maternal and infant mortality. The app uses automated SMS and voice applications which send free, customised, and stage-based education and reminders with messages in English, French, and four widely spoken traditional languages.¹³

In Uganda, Dr. Moses Ochora, first prize winner of the Africa Young Innovators for Health Award and Co-Founder and CEO of Photo-Kabada, developed a remotely monitored phototherapy device to reduce the morbidity and mortality associated with neonatal jaundice in low and middle-income countries.¹⁴ Photo-Kabada is designed to treat multiple infants with jaundice at once, providing phototherapy, oxygen and warmth while also monitoring their vital signs.¹⁵ In Zimbabwe, Vaxiglobal, through biometric data, verifies vaccine deliveries in Africa through contactless biometrics to minimise resource wastage, improve data

quality with open standards and enable the scaling up of vaccination campaigns in African countries.¹⁶ Vaxiglobal, co-founded by Dr Integrity Mchechesi, together with physiotherapist and public health expert Tsitsi Eunice Sifiyali, were 2021 first winners of the Kofi Annan Award for Innovation in Africa.¹⁷ At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the company worked with laboratories, airlines and technology companies to build a safe and approved digital verification system for travellers' immunisation.¹⁸

These success stories exemplify the transformative potential of youth-driven public health initiatives. Young Africans are not only identifying and addressing health challenges in their communities but also creating scalable solutions that can be replicated across the continent. Their efforts underscore the importance of supporting and investing in youth-led innovations to achieve sustainable public health outcomes.

AFRICA CDC YES! HEALTH: THE URGENCY OF NOW

Engaging young people in public health initiatives is a powerful strategy for addressing contemporary health concerns facing Africa. Unfortunately, young people have been unable to meaningfully participate in managing Africa's public health systems due to a dearth of policies that appropriately and comprehensively facilitate their participation.

It is against this backdrop that the Africa CDC YES! Health has emerged as a strategic tool to facilitate the realisation of this goal.

At YPC 2023, young people reiterated the fundamental nature of meaningful youth engagement in realising the NHPO. Throughout the two-day conference, participants expressed the necessity of including their voices in the management of Africa's public health future, calling for an institutionalised youth engagement mechanism that will mainstream youth participation within the Africa CDC. These sentiments were a build-up of concerns raised around mainstreaming youth participation within the Africa CDC that emerged from YPC 2022. It was for these reasons that at YPC 2023, time and resources were dedicated to developing Africa CDC Strategy for Youth Engagement and Participation in Global Health that would facilitate the participation of young people in the management of Africa's public health future.

The strategy, which has a broad health focus, moves beyond single-issue youth engagement that has in the past perpetuated a siloed approach to youth engagement in public health. Instead, this strategy approaches issues through a lens that recognises the interconnectedness and interdependence of health, governance, technology, economic development, security and stability, seeking multisectoral integration and multistakeholder collaborations. It identifies five strategic thematic areas for engaging young people on public health across the African Union and Africa CDC.

These are:

- Developing an architecture to coordinate and mainstream youth engagement within the Africa CDC.
- Facilitating accessible and inclusive spaces (physical and digital) for active and meaningful youth engagement and collaboration through leveraging the opportunities made possible by technology and Innovation.
- Empowering and promoting youth-oriented partnerships in public health initiatives by providing resources and collaboration with diverse and multisectoral stakeholders.
- Developing comprehensive capacity enhancement programmes to expand the quantity and quality of the public health professional workforce and recruit, train, mentor and retain diverse talent.
- Developing and supporting sustainable continental and regional funding mechanisms for implementing youth-led programs.

The strategy, which recognises the role young people play in tackling pre-existing and emerging public health challenges, is a powerful tool for mainstreaming youth participation in Africa's Public health governance architecture and the Africa CDC is best placed to coordinate this process due to the following reasons:

- They are strategically positioned to leverage the wealth of expertise, resources, and networks they have built over the years with a diverse range of stakeholders to ensure the successful implementation of the strategy. These partnerships will also enable the pooling of resources, sharing best practices, and amplifying outreach efforts, ensuring that the YES! Health is robust, inclusive, and far-reaching.

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- As a result of the work they have been doing with regard to youth involvement within Africa's public health governance architecture, they are uniquely positioned to effectively ensure that all collaborating partners seamlessly work together, particularly with young people. This will involve establishing clear communication channels, aligning objectives and activities, and ensuring all stakeholders are engaged and informed throughout the process. Effective coordination ensures efforts are harmonised, maximises the impact of collective actions and ensures the strategy is tailored to the specific needs and contexts of different regions.
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- Africa CDC is currently in a position to spearhead the exploration of various funding streams, including international donors, government allocations, private sector partnerships, and innovative financing mechanisms, to support the diverse components of the YES! Health.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To assess the progress, outcomes, and impact of the YES! Health, a robust monitoring and evaluation framework is key. This framework should include clear indicators, benchmarks, and feedback mechanisms to track performance and gather insights from participants. Regular M&E allows for the identification of successes and challenges in real time, enabling timely adjustments to strategies and interventions. This continuous learning loop is critical for ensuring the strategy remains responsive to the needs of youth and achieves its intended goals.

Youth ownership in the implementation of this strategy is crucial. By including young people from diverse backgrounds in its development, the strategy aimed to ensure that it is designed for youth by youth, and not through a top-down approach. Similar to how young people have taken ownership of the strategy development process, they must continue to take full advantage of the policy environment the strategy will provide. They must make full use of the programs and platforms the strategy offers to build networks, drive health and contribute to the strategy's objectives, results monitoring, and the sustainability of its outcomes.

The support of member states in the implementation of the strategy is indispensable to its success. Member states should replicate the structures being created by Africa CDC to promote youth engagement at regional, national, and subnational levels. This includes annual

convenings, youth advisory teams, and national youth engagement strategies. Some member states, such as Nigeria, have already made strides in engaging youth in health by establishing a national Youth Advisory Team for Health. These efforts should be encouraged and expanded to strengthen meaningful youth engagement in policymaking and implementation in more member states. Furthermore, member states must implement the pledge made under the Abuja Declaration to allocate 15% of the national budget annually to improve national healthcare systems. Special allocations should be made to support youth-led initiatives and actions. Through this, member states can leverage their youth population to drive advocacy, increase knowledge generation, and deepen the uptake of various interventions aimed at improving health outcomes.

Partners and allies of youth in the health sector must support an inclusive and

participatory implementation of YES Health, Africa CDC's agenda for a NPHO, and its Strategic Plan 2023-2027. In the implementation of this strategy, partners should support the development of spaces for young Africans led by young Africans to ensure youth engagement is not only meaningful but also sustainable. Furthermore, it is critical to scale up investment in nurturing a new generation of public health experts and professionals. Partners with global platforms are called upon to connect youth engagement efforts at the continental level with global initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The African continent has reached a pivotal juncture in the evolution of its healthcare infrastructure. Consequently, new and innovative ways of approaching the public health governance architecture on the continent, such as increasing meaningful youth engagement, are necessary.

Young people are the backbone of Africa's future, and an enabling environment that fosters their participation in various policy and decision-making spaces, such as the YES! Health, must be supported. The strategy is anticipated to strengthen youth involvement within the Africa CDC, which is ultimately envisioned to enhance Africa's healthcare systems. Young people have come out strongly to affirm that the youth must be accorded opportunities to contribute to the realisation of the NPHO, which means mainstreaming their participation within the Africa CDC. This approach is important not only for changing Africa's public health future but also for realising the AU Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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About the authors

Kerigo Odada is a lawyer, researcher, and human rights advocate focusing on the right to health, more so sexual and reproductive health and rights. She has over 8 years of experience working on reproductive justice, meaningful youth engagement and violence against women and girls, particularly obstetric violence. Kerigo is passionate about health equity and strengthening health system governance through co-creation, co-leadership and co-ownership with all relevant stakeholders, especially the youth.

Mr. Ibraheem Sanusi is the Head of the GIZ Strengthening Crisis and Pandemic Response in Africa (SCPRA) project. He is a highly versatile international development leadership professional with significant expertise working at the intersections of democratic governance, public policy, digitalisation, and health. He brings strategic, big picture thinking in generating innovative end-to-end policies, programmes and initiatives that make a tangible and sustainable impact on people's lives.

Ms. Metasebiya Ayele Mamo is a Junior Health Advisor at the GIZ African Union Strengthening Crisis and Pandemic Response in Africa (SCPRA) Project. Her work centres on advancing health equity and access to healthcare through meaningful youth engagement at all levels of Africa's public health ecosystem.

About the Strengthening Crisis and Pandemic Response in Africa (SCPRA) Project implemented by GIZ

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