



Off the Beaten Path: Celebrating Leadership and Fostering Collaboration and Innovative Solutions for a Healthy and Prosperous Africa

Policy Brief

Africa faces major public health challenges, with high rates of morbidity and mortality from preventable and treatable diseases such as malaria and neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sub-Saharan Africa bears around 25% of the global burden of disease, but accounts for only 1% of global health spending.¹ This imbalance creates enormous pressure on healthcare systems, which have to deal with a heavy burden of infectious diseases with the limited resources at their disposal.

Today, more than ever, there is an urgent need to prioritize sustainable healthcare solutions that are tailored to the realities of the continent. Collaboration between all sectors is essential to achieve this aim, with governments, civil society and the private sector working together to mobilize resources, share expertise and promote effective public health initiatives. This spirit of partnership is at the heart of Speak Up Africa.

In 2024, the first *Speak Up Africa Day* marked a key milestone in strengthening public health advocacy in Africa. The event, which focused on knowledge sharing, learning, and enhancing collaboration with Speak Up Africa, brought together over 40 organizations, along with decision-makers, experts and actors in development committed to a healthier Africa. The theme of the first edition, *"Off the beaten path: Celebrating leadership and fostering collaboration and innovative solutions for a healthy and prosperous Africa"* underscores the urgent need for innovative approaches to meet the healthcare needs of a growing, dynamic continent.

Obstacles to building more resilient healthcare systems in Africa

- **Inadequate coordination and lack of sustainable funding**

"Our countries need to position themselves on the world stage and speak with one voice to influence funding and develop endogenous solutions." Dr. Ibrahima Socé Fall, Director of the NTD Department at WHO Africa.

The heavy dependence of many African countries on international funding is an obstacle to autonomous and sustainable health policies. This, in turn, reduces the resilience of our health systems, limiting their ability to respond proactively to the needs of the people they serve. To take one example, neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), which affect millions of the most vulnerable people, receive an extremely small share of global funding, despite their devastating impact on public health and community economic development. Improving coordination between regional and international players would help to maximize the use of limited resources and target domestic investments on locally adapted solutions.

¹ <https://www.who.int/data>

- **Underrepresentation of women and youth in decision-making bodies**

"Women, in particular, face special challenges, such as the lack of funding to support their participation, patriarchal gender norms that stifle their voices, and low levels of recognition of their skills and leadership. These obstacles hold women and young people back from making their unique and essential contributions to health policy design." Fatima Sy, President of ASAFE.

Although some progress has been made towards parity, less than 30% of decision-making positions are held by women, and their influence in such roles is often marginalized.² Underrepresentation creates an imbalance in decision-making, where public health policies do not always take into account the diverse perspectives that are vital to effectively addressing the needs of the whole population. More inclusive participation of women and young people in decision-making processes is essential to building greater equality and fairness in healthcare systems. When these groups are meaningfully represented, public health policies are better tailored to the realities of all segments of the population, including the most vulnerable.

- **Limited access to resources and digital infrastructure**

"Designing digital healthcare solutions that are adapted to local contexts is crucial to maximizing their impact. This includes developing tools in local languages, simplifying interfaces to ensure they can be used intuitively, and working with telecommunications operators to extend internet coverage to underserved areas." Carolyn Kamasaka, Senior Program Officer at PATH

While digital health represents a vital opportunity to improve healthcare access in Africa, it remains largely inaccessible in many communities. A lack of essential infrastructure, such as internet access, combined with low levels of digital literacy, means a significant proportion of the population is unable to benefit from digital health innovations. These obstacles compound health inequalities, leaving rural communities—and women in particular—on the sidelines of technological progress. Their exclusion not only exacerbates health disparities, but also limits empowerment opportunities for women, who could use digital tools to improve their knowledge about health and access preventive and curative services.

Towards inclusive, sustainable, and innovative solutions for improving healthcare systems in Africa

"The future of healthcare in Africa depends on communities' ability to take ownership of healthcare solutions tailored to their realities." Yacine Djibo, Executive Director, Speak Up Africa.

- **Mobilizing domestic resources to support sustainable autonomy in healthcare systems**

Mobilizing domestic resources is crucial to increasing the autonomy of African healthcare systems and reducing their dependence on international funding. Several mechanisms can be used to contribute to domestic resource mobilization, including innovative tax schemes, private sector contributions, and participatory financing initiatives.

One concrete example of this approach is the *"Zero Malaria! Businesses Commit"* campaign in Benin, launched by Ecobank in collaboration with Speak Up Africa. This initiative was able to increase national resources allocated to the fight against malaria by 140% in 2023. By actively involving local businesses, the campaign has demonstrated the effectiveness of public-private partnerships in mobilizing local resources, while fostering

² <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/progress-of-the-worlds-women>

a more collaborative and inclusive approach to public health. Domestic resource mobilization is not just a financial solution; it also represents a way to increase health sovereignty, whereby African healthcare systems are strengthened, empowered, and better prepared to meet current and future challenges.

- **Women and youth representation and leadership in governance bodies for fairer health policies**

The inclusion of women and young people in governance bodies is critical for the development of health policies that are fair, representative, and responsive to the needs of the population as a whole. Promoting their leadership not only enriches the political debate and decision making, but also brings solutions that are better aligned with the realities of local communities.

Initiatives such as [Voix Essentielles](#) have helped many women gain access to decision-making positions and strengthen their influence in their communities. By actively involving women and young people in decision making, healthcare systems can be more sensitive to specific issues facing their communities, such as healthcare access in rural areas and support for vulnerable groups.

More diverse leadership contributes to fairer and more robust healthcare policies, while legitimizing decision making and building community support for public health initiatives. Inclusiveness helps foster a more collaborative and resilient approach, where each group can contribute its expertise and experience to building a more equitable healthcare system for all.

- **Sustainable collaboration and partnerships to maximize public health impact**

"It is vitally important to step up investment and strengthen coordination between civil society players, decision-makers and experts." Serigne Mbaye, Secretary General of the Ministry of Health and Social Action

Multi-sector partnerships, bringing together the public sector, the private sector and civil society organizations, are an effective approach to tackling public health challenges in Africa. By pooling their resources and skills, these players can maximize the impact of healthcare initiatives and enhance their sustainability.

By working together, they are able to effectively mobilize local resources and strengthen community ownership of health initiatives. For example, the [Unité de Coordination du Partenariat de Ouagadougou](#) ! (Ouagadougou Partnership Coordination Unit) has helped position the West African region as a leader in family planning. This type of partnership promotes a collective response tailored to local needs by including community voices right from the planning stage.

By building sustainable alliances, African countries can develop integrated health strategies capable of meeting their long-term needs. South-South partnerships, in particular, make it easier for African countries to exchange best practices and innovations, and develop solutions geared to their local realities. The development of [AMREF Health Africa's international training facility](#) is a concrete example of this. Active involvement of local players also enhances the effectiveness of healthcare interventions and the legitimacy of programs by ensuring greater acceptance at the community level. Thanks to a synergy of efforts and a clear division of roles and responsibilities, inclusive partnerships help to build more resilient healthcare systems and guarantee program continuity, even in times of crisis.

- **Digital technology and innovation: Accelerating access to healthcare for all**

Technological innovations, particularly in the field of digital health, are transforming access to healthcare in Africa, especially for rural populations who often live far from health centers. Adapting digital tools to local contexts by translating them into local languages and simplifying their interfaces makes them easier to adopt and more efficient.

For example, the *African Women in Digital Health* (AWiDH) initiative promotes women's inclusion in digital health technologies, positioning them not only as beneficiaries, but above all as key players who innovate and create solutions to meet the needs they identify in their own communities. By highlighting their unique expertise and perspectives, AWiDH helps women become driving forces in improving access to healthcare for all, while adapting technologies to local realities.

Rethinking Healthcare: Working Together to Increase Africa's Autonomy through Innovation and Collaboration

"We must dare to say that we are here, we are here, and human health is more than human capital." Adjaratou Diakhon Ndiaye, Permanent Secretary of the "One Health" National Health Security High Council

Given the persistent health challenges in Africa, a collective, inclusive, and innovative response is key to building resilient and equitable healthcare systems. This call to action is aimed at all players—including governments, the private sector, and civil society—who have a key role to play in transforming healthcare systems and making them accessible to all.

The Public sector: Investing in the autonomy and equity of the healthcare system

- Define innovative approaches to domestic financing (e.g. special taxes) and support private-sector involvement to reduce dependence on external funding.
- Promote inclusive governance by increasing women and youth representation in decision-making bodies to ensure that healthcare policies reflect everyone's needs.
- Optimize resources and enhance the effectiveness of public health initiatives through strategic partnerships with the private sector and civil society.
- Invest in digital infrastructure to improve access to remote healthcare, especially in rural areas, and support local innovation tailored to African realities.

The Private sector: Stimulating innovation and supporting public health

- Contribute to public health funding through social responsibility initiatives (e.g. *"Zero Malaria! Businesses Commit"*), illustrating the impact of public-private partnerships.
- Develop and adapt healthcare innovations to African settings, in collaboration with the public sector, to facilitate access to healthcare.
- Promote women and youth inclusion in healthcare innovation initiatives, supporting them as creators and key contributors to meeting community needs.

Civil society: Advocating for inclusive and sustainable healthcare policies

- Advocate for equitable healthcare policies tailored to local realities by encouraging decision-makers to adopt measures that meet the needs of local people, especially the most vulnerable.
- Advocate for the inclusion of women and young people in governance bodies, ensuring broader representation in public health decisions.
- Promote greater access to digital health technologies, by ensuring that innovations are designed inclusively, with the active participation of women and young people.