

## **Summary of INDEPTH Network Stakeholders Meeting: “Rebooting” the INDEPTH Network**

### **Introduction**

The recent two-day gathering of stakeholders at the Royale Fiesta Hotel in Accra, Ghana, marked a significant moment in the history of the INDEPTH Network. Themed "Rebooting" the INDEPTH Network, the meeting served as a pivotal opportunity for stakeholders to collectively chart a course towards rejuvenating the network for sustained impact and innovation. The choice of the term "Rebooting" is deliberate, signifying the collective commitment to revitalizing, reinvigorating, and redefining the future of the network. It is a moment of reflection, strategic planning, and collaborative envisioning. Representatives from HDSS Sites, Global Health Organizations, Research Institutions, and esteemed collaborators engaged in thoughtful discourse on the future trajectory of INDEPTH.

This executive report summarizes the key discussions, themes, and resolutions that emerged during the meeting, highlighting the forward-looking vision of the Network's future.

Prof. Fred Binka acknowledged the Network's past challenges while emphasizing the importance of focusing on the future. He briefly revisited the financial struggles and other challenges that have shaped the network's trajectory, and the need for collective efforts to overcome these obstacles. Despite past tribulations, the meeting was a pivotal moment for rebuilding and redefining the INDEPTH Network.

Acting Chief Executive Director, Prof. Philip Adongo, provided an overview of the network's current status. He outlined the challenges faced in taking over of the network's operations and highlighted efforts to address the loss of crucial data and infrastructure. Despite significant impediment, he underscored the resilience of the network and its ongoing efforts to rebuild and move forward.

The first day of the INDEPTH Stakeholder Meeting featured presentations from esteemed speakers covering a wide array of topics ranging from Demographic Surveillance Systems (DSS) to clinical trials and pandemic preparedness.

Dr. Honorati Masanja discussed the importance of long-term cohort studies in understanding health outcomes in individuals' lifetimes. Highlighting the Ifakara Millennium Cohort Study as an example, he emphasized the need for more longitudinal studies in Africa and the potential for collaboration to advance research in the region.

Dr. Emily Atuheire outlined Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC's) initiatives to enhance mortality surveillance across the continent, particularly in response to the challenges revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic. She emphasized the importance of a comprehensive approach and collaboration with stakeholders, including Health and Demographic Surveillance System (HDSS) sites, to strengthen mortality data infrastructure.

A SWOT analysis highlighting the potential contributions of HDSS expertise to civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) improvement was done by Dr. Robert Mswia. He underscored the opportunities for HDSS sites to become National Centers of excellence and offered recommendations for leveraging their capabilities to support national systems.

Dr. Dan Kajungu highlighted the journey of the Makerere University Centre for Professional Research's DSS framework in Uganda. Coverage includes 65 villages in Iganga and Mayuge districts, emphasizing the role of Community-Owned Resource Persons. This Centre focuses on health systems, maternal and child health, sepsis, mental health. Efforts to build laboratory capacity and strengthen community engagement were discussed. Future plans included cost-effective methods like telephone reporting and community collaboration.

A presentation on the significant impact HDSS data facilitated clinical trials' was made by Prof. MD Khalequzzaman. Trials on rotavirus, polio, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), hepatitis E, HPV, and chronic diseases risk factors were discussed. HDSS data provided critical support for these trials, influencing global recommendations and policy decisions. Challenges discussed included sustaining HDSS due to reduced donor interest and the system's contribution to identifying emerging health threats globally.

Prof. Pedro Alonso advocated for INDEPTH's leadership role in coordinating clinical trials in Africa. Emphasis was laid on the importance of Demographic Surveillance Systems (DSS) in sustaining clinical trials and addressing public health challenges. He proposed a partnership where INDEPTH could provide leadership in supporting clinical trials development efforts. He noted the changing landscape of public health in Africa and the potential for INDEPTH to play a crucial role in clinical trials.

The role of the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP) in product development for poverty-related diseases was discussed by Dr. Thomas Nyirenda. He noted the challenges faced by EDCTP and the importance of sustainable networks in sub-Saharan Africa and advocated for INDEPTH's revitalization as a trusted partner of EDCTP networks to enhance access to data and to support clinical research.

Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI's) efforts in vaccine development were discussed. Prof. Peter Smith explained CEPI's mission and approach in vaccine development,

emphasizing the need for rapid response to emerging infectious diseases. CEPI's portfolio, funding structure, and initiatives in Africa, particularly the Research Preparedness Program were highlighted. The importance of collaboration with organizations like INDEPTH to strengthen vaccine development efforts was emphasized.

International Vaccine Institute's (IVI's) expansion and collaboration with INDEPTH was outlined by Dr. Mamadou Sidibe. Discussions were held on IVI's objectives, core units, disease focus, and capacity-building initiatives. The organization's global vaccine research efforts and its ongoing programs in Africa were discussed. IVI's collaboration with INDEPTH was highlighted and the potential for leveraging each other's expertise was made.

Dr. Bernhards Ogutu introduced PANTHER, an organization focused on revolutionizing clinical trials in response to emerging epidemics. He discussed PANTHER's objectives, key components, operational framework, challenges, and solutions. The presentation underlined the importance of building regional research capacity and addressing regulatory hurdles.

The Life Health's Digital Solutions for Clinical Trials was also introduced by Dr. Bernhards Ogutu. This platform aims at enhancing the efficiency of HDSS and clinical trials. The potential impact of digital solutions on data collection, patient recruitment, and telemedicine was discussed. The presentation highlighted ongoing pilot projects in Uganda and noted the challenges and opportunities associated with digital solutions.

These sessions provided valuable insights into the current landscape of demographic surveillance, clinical trials, and pandemic preparedness efforts in Africa. The discussions underscored the importance of collaboration, capacity-building, and innovative approaches to address public health challenges effectively.

### **Key Points from Day Two:**

Representatives from various HDSS sites presented snapshots of ongoing activities.

Sites such as Nanoro in Burkina Faso, Dodowa and Navrongo in Ghana, Ifakara in Tanzania, Iganga in Uganda, Kombewa in Kenya, Manhica Health Research Center, Mozambique and others highlighted their demographic surveillance systems, population coverage, and key research activities.

Ongoing clinical trials and studies were discussed, including those related to malaria, rotavirus, diagnostic tools, nutrition-related communicable diseases, and adolescent health interventions. Significant achievements such as completing phase three trials for vaccines, engagement in COVID-19 monitoring, and contributing to global health initiatives were highlighted.

Challenges such as funding constraints, sustainability of studies, and adapting to decreasing malaria transmission rates were acknowledged by various DSS sites.

Future directions for the DSS sites included sustaining demographic surveillance, submitting funding proposals for continued research, and exploring new research areas such as mental health and disability. Emphasis was placed on the importance of collaboration, flexibility, and adaptation to ensure the success and relevance of HDSS sites in the future.

A summary of legal proceedings and restructuring efforts for INDEPTH was presented by the legal team, highlighting the need for inclusivity and coordination among sites. The importance of safeguarding INDEPTH's structure and history through a comprehensive constitution was emphasized.

The role of technology in data collection and analysis within the INDEPTH network was discussed by Prof Bruce Macleod. Challenges and efforts to streamline mobile data collection, integrate different data systems, and establish a Technology Advisory Group were highlighted. Suggestions for improving data extraction, analysis efficiency, and collaboration among sites were provided.

The presentations from the first session of the second day of the meeting provided valuable insights into the activities, achievements, challenges, and future directions of HDSS sites within the INDEPTH network. Moving forward, these insights will inform the development of a shorter visionary strategic report that focuses on the future of INDEPTH, highlighting key messages for the wider community of stakeholders.

Professors Don de Savigny and Jim Philips delineated the evolving landscape of global health, stressing the urgency of addressing climate change, epidemiological transitions, and technological advancements. The presentations underscored the imperative for INDEPTH to adapt and innovate in response to emerging challenges while leveraging collaborative networks and new methodologies.

Prof. David Ross elucidated the vision for a clinical trials network within INDEPTH, emphasizing the pivotal role of Health and Demographic Surveillance Systems (HDSS) in supporting large-scale population-based studies. The discussions underscored the importance of near real-time data, mobile reporting systems, and robust governance structures to facilitate seamless collaboration and methodological sharing.

### **Direction of the INDEPTH Network**

Under the facilitation of Professor Fred Binka, the INDEPTH Network stakeholders' meeting delved into crucial discussions on the future direction of the organization. This session epitomized the collective endeavor to rejuvenate INDEPTH through transparent governance,

strategic partnerships, and inclusive decision-making. Participants articulated concrete action items, including the formation of working groups, engagement with industry , and clarifying membership criteria, underscoring a commitment to transparency, and sustainable growth. Recognizing the interim leadership of Prof. Adongo in stabilizing the network, Prof. Binka spearheaded deliberations aimed at charting a clear path forward.

### ***Key Insights and Proposals***

***Establishment of Working Groups:*** Participants explored the formation of working groups focused on governance, mobile data, universal projects, and trial costing to drive specific initiatives forward, emphasizing collaboration and tangible outcomes.

***Engagement with External Entities:*** Discussions highlighted the importance of engaging with industry partners and global health organizations, drawing from experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic to identify opportunities for collaboration.

***Utilization of Existing Networks:*** Leveraging existing projects and networks within INDEPTH sites was emphasized as a strategy to propel the organization into a new phase of productivity, emphasizing collaboration and innovation.

***Immediate Action Items:*** Urgency was stressed in establishing working groups promptly to address critical aspects such as clinical trials, data integration, and mobile technology implementation.

***Governance and Legal Framework:*** Concerns regarding governance structures and legal requirements were addressed, with a commitment to establishing a dedicated working group to make inputs into a draft proposal of the Regulations of the Network.

***Financial Planning and Office Setup:*** Financial sustainability emerged as a priority, with discussions focusing on the need for a detailed financial plan and practical considerations for an office setup.

***Engagement Beyond Health Sector:*** Exploring collaborations beyond the health sector for a holistic approach to research was proposed, with suggestions to form a task force for strategic engagement with potential partners.

***Communication Strategy:*** Clear and transparent communication was highlighted as essential, with discussions on the need for a communication strategy or team to ensure effective dissemination of information.

***Leadership Transition and Roles:*** Plans for a gradual transition in leadership, including a sabbatical for Prof. Adongo and involvement of key figures like Prof. Frank Baiden, were outlined to stabilize INDEPTH and facilitate leadership succession.

***Commitment to Transparency and Inclusivity:*** Throughout the session, a commitment to transparency and inclusivity was evident, with assurances from Prof. Binka that all decisions and processes would be shared openly, and stakeholders would be actively involved in shaping the network's future.

***Partnership Commitments:*** Several institutions reiterated their commitment to partnering with INDEPTH network through a collaborative efforts necessary for the network's revitalization.

The session concluded with excitement and commitment from participants to revitalize INDEPTH network, with plans for detailed timelines and formation of internal working groups to drive specific tasks forward. The collaborative spirit and dynamic discussions showed a promising picture of INDEPTH's resurgence as a prominent force in research and collaboration.

### **Way Forward and Conclusion**

The stakeholder meeting served as a platform for robust discussions and collaborative envisioning of the future of the INDEPTH Network. Despite past challenges, stakeholders expressed optimism and commitment to revitalizing the network for sustained impact and innovation. Moving forward, the network will continue to engage with stakeholders, leverage its expertise, and embrace new opportunities to fulfill its mission of advancing health research in Africa and Asia.

The meeting concluded with a renewed sense of purpose and commitment towards revitalizing the INDEPTH Network for its next phase of impactful research and collaboration. Participants expressed enthusiasm for the forthcoming initiatives and pledged to actively contribute to INDEPTH 2.0's success. As the network embarks on this transformative journey, it embraces the ethos of agility, innovation, and collective action to address the complex health challenges of our time.