

From Evidence to Action — Bridging Gaps in East Africa

Senior health experts from Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya met on December 8 in Bagamoyo, Tanzania, to discuss the creation of a new Eastern African regional centre to translate health research into government action.

It's a common problem, and not just in the developing world: worthwhile results from good health research don't come fast enough, or aren't user-friendly enough, to guide policymakers in their daily decisions.

Now, part of a political movement to harmonize many economic and social policies among Eastern African countries may help to change that. The proposed new centre could help decode sometimes-arcane research results and translate them into formats that policymakers can use to make informed choices.

"We want to close the gap between research and the policies we create," said the Permanent Secretary of the [Tanzanian Ministry of Health \(MoH\)](#), Mariam J. Mwaffisi. "We are going to think big, start small, and act now."

The meeting stemmed from the [Tanzania Essential Health Interventions Project \(TEHIP\)](#) supported by the MoH and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Since 1997, TEHIP has influenced health policy and practice and helped strengthen the health system in two of the country's districts. It did so in part by carefully integrating and packaging research results for decision-makers' use. The initiative is credited with, among other things, helping these districts reduce child mortality rates by at least 30%.

The proposed centre would need to be "an institution that works, that shows results," Gabriel Upunda, Tanzania's Chief Medical Officer, told the meeting.

Miriam K. Were, a public health researcher and Chair of Kenya's National AIDS Control Council, as well as of the African Medical Research Foundation, added that, since the late 1970s, East Africa has been strengthening district health systems. TEHIP has clarified how district health services can help increase health equity for 90 million people in East Africa.

Nelson Sewankambo, Dean of Medicine at Uganda's Makerere University and a leader in Africa's fight against HIV/AIDS, said his own involvement in research has shown him that translating research into real action is at least as important as the research itself.

"Many times I have heard the comment that it is a researcher's duty to produce good science and reports and it is up to policymakers to find the results and make use of them," he said. "But now I see more and more that it has to be a concerted effort, of both parties, to make the linkages. Seeing how research results have the impact that they should adds a lot of meaning, sense, and value to why research is done."

Details of the Eastern African regional centre will be finalized after a meeting in Entebbe, Uganda, in mid-December and a meeting in Kenya set for January 2005.

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