



## Core argument

The report argues for a multi-faceted ‘syndemics’ approach that takes account of the interrelationship between disease and political and socio-economic contexts. The central message of the research is that strengthening health systems and countering outbreaks of disease require an integrated, inclusive and transdisciplinary approach. A critical element is the need for African countries to forge partnerships to develop the capacity for research that is responsive to the lived experiences and health needs of their populations.

The study incorporated research and experiences relevant across the African continent. As a result, the recommendations are wide-ranging and general, although key themes and patterns emerge again and again. The project also included highly specific research arising out of studies of particular countries and cases, including cholera in Zimbabwe; Ebola in Nigeria; South Africa’s proposed National Health Insurance (NHI) and a study of its frontline health workers.

## ADVANCING TREATMENT OF CHOLERA IN ZIMBABWE

All the IV fluids used for rehydration in Zimbabwe in the last ten years, including for cholera outbreaks, were imported from South Africa and other countries.

When disease breaks out, most deaths occur in the delay between the start of the outbreak and the arrival of the commodities imported to counter the outbreak. These commodities include diagnostic tests and medical supplies.

- Countries should ensure a stock of the commodities needed to counter an epidemic.
- Investment should be made in regional manufacturing of these commodities.

## LESSONS FROM NIGERIA’S EXPERIENCE OF EBOLA

An investigation into the ebola outbreak in Nigeria revealed that a decisive and rapid response from government officials was what led to the successful halting of the disease. The rapid deployment of community-based agents, including community health workers working with NGOs, to undertake contact tracing, community sensitisation, promotion of epidemiologically and culturally appropriate protective practices, and data collection played a crucial role in halting the spread of ebola.

## Key findings

- Project findings reinforce the view that the treatment and prevention of disease cannot be separated from the wider socio-economic context in which it occurs.
- There is much more that can be done to manage disease and healthcare in Africa. Key to this is the strengthening and good management of health systems, as they play a central role in dealing with chronic as well as periodic diseases and epidemics. The bolstering of healthcare systems must be a collaborative exercise as varied disciplines and government departments have an impact on health outcomes.
- Many African countries do not have supplies of medical commodities like diagnostic kits and medical supplies. This delays responses to the outbreak of diseases like cholera and malaria.
- Efficient surveillance systems are key to the early detection of outbreaks. Together with effective communication systems, they assist with information sharing and consequent control of disease locally and across borders.
- NCDs are on the rise and require a management system that takes into account the overburdened health systems on the continent. They are chronic and require a different approach to outbreaks. Lessons should be drawn from successful HIV interventions, as that illness has become a chronic one.
- Emerging and disruptive technology, such as nanotechnology, can play a major role in the provision of affordable, effective medicine and disease prevention. The scarcity of researchers on the continent has led to a dearth of research output from Africa.
- More extensive research into zoonotic diseases is needed. It seems there is an increasing threat from diseases resulting from human contact with animals due to rapid urbanisation and a change in the ecological scope in African countries.
- There is a place for traditional medicine and traditional healers in the health system. Some citizens frequent traditional healers and these healers should be formally included into health systems and National Health Insurance (NHI) schemes.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations are based on key case studies and research.

### *Multisectoral and collaborative interventions*

- **Interventions aimed at eliminating and controlling disease in Africa must integrate varied initiatives.** These include improvements to sanitation, hygiene, water supply, nutritional status and childcare.
- **Health promotions and primary healthcare initiatives should include NCDs.** Tackling NCDs requires providing training for healthcare providers, task sharing, and integration of care pathways and guidelines.
- **Suitable, feasible and scalable models need to be developed** for increased efficiency of the limited health resources available.
- **The implications of population migration for healthcare, including increased demand for health services, should be taken into account.** A migratory population often results in high concentrations of people in urban areas, with a correspondingly increased risk of contracting and spreading infections.
- **Animal clinicians should also be consulted** when developing healthcare policies. In general, zoonotic diseases should be integrated into the spectrum of diseases being addressed by the health sector.
- **Disease control and elimination policies should be aligned across regions** as diseases are transmitted across borders.
- **Networks should be established between research projects, tertiary institutions and the private sector across the continent.** These partnerships are important in promoting research that is relevant to Africa, and in ensuring that this continent develops technologies that will address its burden of disease.

## GROWTH STUNTING AND LESSONS ON SYNDEMICS

Stunting is omnipresent in sub-Saharan Africa and the casualties from it exceed those from conventional epidemics. A study of this phenomenon in Zimbabwe reveals the need for multi-sectoral health interventions: nutritional interventions alone have not led to the anticipated improvements in nutritional status. Rather, research has found that environmental factors like sanitation, childcare and healthcare are all necessary to halt growth stunting.