

ANALYSING THE IMPACT OF THE AFRICAN FORUM FOR RESEARCH AND EDUCATION IN HEALTH (AFREHEALTH) IN GHANA: A QUALITATIVE EVALUATION STUDY.

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Author's contributions

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ABSTRACT

To evaluate the impact of the African Forum for Research and Education in Health (AFREhealth) in Ghana in its first five years, after its launch in 2016. AFREhealth is an African initiative created and implemented by Africans in their continent with the support of international partners, to find solutions to health challenges that have plagued the continent. To explore how the health professions communities of participating institutions have been impacted by AFREhealth and how the wider society consisting of key health professions education and research stakeholders and service consumers has benefitted from AFREhealth's presence on the continent. The evaluation will identify lessons learned and how to apply them to improve AFREhealth as a continental organization. This qualitative study utilized focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and data

analyzed thematically. A total of 57 registered members of AFREhealth participated in both key informant interviews (KIIs) and focused group discussions (FGDs). The respondents included health professionals, students in health profession's education institutions, and others that have ever received support and services from AFREhealth. Keywords: Evaluation, impact, health professional education, AFREhealth, Africa

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The availability of health human resources that are sufficient to meet the needs of the population is a challenge in most parts of the world, and Africa is no exception (WHO, 2024). Among the WHO's recommendations are advocacy, establishing and supporting regional networks of key stakeholders and experts, and regional, inter-country and national partnerships and collaborations (WHO, 2024). Many initiatives on the African continent have been implemented in attempts to address health human resources issues from a multidimensional socio-ecological perspective. One such initiative is the African Forum for Research and Education in Health (AFREhealth), a Pan-African institution that evolved out of Medical and Nursing Education partnership initiatives (MEPI/NEPI) in Africa and was established to address the health human resources crisis for the region. Additionally, with the improved integration of the outputs of research in the policymaking process, the creation of sustainable solutions to health systems in Africa will be safer through the establishment of long-term and scalable solutions (McQuide *et al.*, 2023, Were *et al.*, 2019).

AFREhealth is a reputable organization, an African initiative created and implemented by Africans in their continent with support and guidance of international partners, to find solutions to health challenges that have plagued the continent. AFREhealth was launched in 2016 and has existed till date. In addition, any expansion of effective interventions should be able to overcome barriers of practice standardization in various cultural and institutional settings, and this obstacle will require new and flexible ways of working (Okunogbe *et al.*, 2020, Ajuebor *et al.*, 2019). The overall objective of this project is to explore the impact of AFREhealth's work between 2018 and 2023 and the extent to which this work has been effective in addressing Africa's complex health challenges. The evaluation will focus on the following health human resources aspects: the promotion of strong inter-professional collaboration and skills development and shared learning to increase quantity, quality and retention of African health workers at the forefront of Africa's responses to key health priorities including Tuberculosis, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Malaria, Maternal, Newborn & Child Health (MNCH), and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) among others. The project aims to achieve the following:

2.0 METHODS

Study Sample

We used a sample of convenience approach in this study, and participants were purposively recruited via the community of practice platforms and using the snowball approach. This qualitative study utilized Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) with health profession practitioners, students, and other communities that have received support and services from AFREhealth in the five-year period.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Ibadan/University College Hospital (UI/UCH) Ethics Committee and the National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) in Nigeria, alongside relevant ethics committees in DRC and Uganda.

Data Collection

Research assistants trained in interviewing techniques conducted the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and In-depth Interviews (IDIs) using semi-structured interview guides focused on eliciting research goal related information. We had three (3) FGD sessions with twenty-seven (27) members while KIIs employed thirty (30) individual participants. All interviews were conducted in English and transcribed verbatim with participants consent before each session of the data collection.

Data analysis

We used semi-structured interview guides designed for this study. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to all the participants.

3.0 RESULTS

The study aimed to collect qualitative insights to evaluate the organization's progress and explore opportunities for improvement. The respondents included medical doctors and interns, registered nurses, pharmacists, health educators, social workers, medical health records officers, physiotherapists, technicians, psychologists, and graduate health professionals. The respondents shared their understanding of impact, describing it as measurable changes brought about by AFREhealth's activities. Some identified AFREhealth's efforts to disseminate health knowledge and create platforms for collaboration as pivotal. These initiatives have enabled health professionals to connect, share resources, and collectively address pressing healthcare issues. The interviews and focus group discussions conducted with AFREhealth members provided valuable insights into the organization's impact, its contributions to healthcare education and research, and areas for improvement over its five-year history. The discussions spanned a wide range of topics, from the organization's governance and programs to its role in advancing healthcare practices across Africa.

DISCUSSIONS BASED ON KEY THEMES:

1. Understanding and Defining Impact One of the central topics in all the interviews and discussions was the concept of "impact." Participants commonly defined impact as the positive influence that AFREhealth's initiatives have on healthcare professionals and communities. Impact was often linked to personal and professional development, with many respondents sharing how AFREhealth's programs had shaped their careers, provided networking opportunities, and improved their skills in areas like research, leadership, and interprofessional education.

For example, "_Sipho" (pseudonym) stated,

"a PMCT counsellor has allowed me to observe critical challenges in our schedules and programs. I believe there are areas for improvement to make a significant impact on issues like HIV and interprofessional education programs".

"Yaa", a nurse and health educator in explaining "impact" begins by clarifying the word "impact" as "burden." She said,

"I wouldn't say "burden" is a term of interest for me, as it can imply a particular viewpoint. When I use the word "burden," I expect you to understand the context referred to as achievement. It's challenging to describe "burden" in terms of activities or outcomes—positive or negative if in my profession, I have to deduce what a case, management and communication or breaking new after diagnosing a patient in practice has been, but the lessons learnt from the AFREhealth STRIPE HIV program has made things easier".

2. Personal and Professional Impact:

Many respondents highlighted how AFREhealth has contributed to their personal and professional growth. For instance, several members highlighted the organization's role in improving their clinical skills, knowledge-sharing, and overall career development. In particular, training programs such as STRIPE HIV and other educational workshops have proven beneficial in strengthening the capacity of healthcare professionals to address various health challenges in Africa. With regards to AFREhealth's impact on professional development, participants shared many examples.

For instance, "Joyce" (pseudonym), a female dentist, said the following:

"As I said earlier, I took a course in HIV maternal prevention from mother to child. So I had very little knowledge on that because originally I'm a dentist, so like we don't usually do some of these general things, and when I started working, I realized that I usually meet people with HIV and you have to

educate and advise them. So this course was helpful to acquire knowledge so that I can advise my patients."

3. Collaboration and Partnerships:

A recurring suggestion across the discussions was the need for stronger partnerships and collaborations. Participants emphasized the importance of engaging local and international organizations, universities, healthcare ministries, and stakeholders to expand AFREhealth's reach and effectiveness. Many felt that AFREhealth should formalize its collaborations with teaching hospitals and research institutions to create more opportunities for knowledge exchange and joint projects. For instance, "Juliet" (pseudonym) one of the respondents said:

"the value of partnerships, noting that collaboration with other health organizations could help AFREhealth amplify its impact. She suggests that by working WITH water bottle institutions that have similar objectives, AFREhealth could enhance the scope and visibility of its initiatives. And when Partnerships could also offer AFREhealth additional resources and expertise to support its mission".

4. Challenges and Areas for Improvement:

Respondents identified several challenges that AFREhealth faces in its operations. These include the need for better communication and outreach, particularly to younger professionals and underrepresented regions like Northern Ghana. Additionally, issues like membership affordability, logistical constraints, and limited visibility of AFREhealth's activities were mentioned. Participants suggested enhancing AFREhealth's branding, improving access to training resources, and addressing gaps in regional representation. Challenges such as limited resources and the need for better governance were noted, recommending leveraging available platforms like newsletters and social media to bridge gaps and ensure active participation. They also stressed the importance of tailoring programs to meet the unique needs of various communities.

As an example, Frank (a pseudonym), "a pharmacist and post graduate student advises that

"AFREhealth make its programs more visible to healthcare professionals across Africa, which could increase engagement and foster a larger community of active members. He also suggests that AFREhealth work on improving accessibility to its resources and programs to ensure that members can fully benefit from all available opportunities. This might include more inclusive outreach efforts to engage professionals at different career stages".

5. Measuring AFREhealth's Impact: A significant portion of the discussions focused on how to measure the impact of AFREhealth's initiatives. Respondents suggested using specific metrics such as improvements in healthcare delivery, member satisfaction, and the effectiveness of training programs. They suggested tracking activities such as health education, policy changes, and improved healthcare delivery. The organization's newsletters, social media platforms, and collaborative initiatives were identified as tools that raise awareness and participation, ultimately contributing to measurable outcomes. Many emphasized the importance of continuous evaluations, surveys, and feedback from participants to gauge the success of AFREhealth's programs and make necessary adjustments.

Janet (pseudonym), a Physiotherapist, highlights AFREhealth's resources for learning interprofessional skills, "which she considers essential for professional growth. Programs like technical working groups, manuscript writing workshops, and grant opportunities are beneficial for healthcare practitioners. Acknowledging AFREhealth's efforts to provide grants and collaborative projects, which she views as valuable tools for building practical skills and networking within the healthcare community evaluating AFREhealth positively for creating accessible platforms for education and collaboration, suggesting that these initiatives represent significant indicators of the organization's impact on individual members and the broader healthcare sector".

6. Future Expectations:

Looking toward the future, many participants expressed optimism about AFREhealth's potential to grow and expand its influence. There was a shared vision for AFREhealth to become a leading hub for healthcare education and research,

not only within Africa but globally. The need for more sustainable, long-term initiatives, particularly in addressing pressing healthcare challenges such as HIV, maternal health, and non-communicable diseases, was a common theme. To emphasize this point, for example, Effa (pseudonym), a medical intern, expressed an interest in seeing AFREhealth offer even more targeted educational programs, stating,

"particularly in interprofessional studies and public health, that address regional healthcare challenges specific to Africa, suggesting that AFREhealth continue developing opportunities for members to connect and collaborate with other professionals. She sees this as essential for building a stronger and more unified healthcare network within the continent. He believes that AFREhealth could make an even greater impact by focusing on local health challenges and tailoring its programs to address these needs directly".

7. Suggestions for Improvement:

Participants shared a variety of suggestions for how AFREhealth could improve its operations and impact:

- **Enhanced Communication and Visibility:** Improve communication channels through newsletters, social media, and webinars to increase engagement and attract new members.
- **Targeted Training and Resources:** Provide more specialized training programs and resources, particularly for young professionals and institutions.
- **Stronger Governance and Engagement:** Strengthen AFREhealth's governance structure to ensure more membership inclusive decision-making and greater member involvement.
- **Expanding Regional Outreach:** Focus on expanding AFREhealth's reach into underserved regions, particularly Northern Ghana by creating local chapters and leveraging digital platforms for broader participation.

AndSome expressed hopes for AFREhealth to engage in more innovative programs and address emerging health challenges across the continent. Others highlighted the need for policy changes, particularly in areas such as funding and grants, to support sustainable healthcare solutions. They highlighted the need to expand initiatives that foster professional development, improve healthcare access, and address emerging issues. Parameters for evaluating these initiatives were also recommended to ensure their effectiveness".

8. Recommendations for Policy and Strategy:

- **Partnerships and Sponsorships:** Pursue more strategic partnerships with organizations like WHO, regional healthcare ministries, and academic institutions to increase AFREhealth's reach and resource availability.
- **Addressing Healthcare Challenges:** Many respondents called for AFREhealth to expand their focus on emerging health challenges, including mental health, sickle cell disease, and maternal health.
- **Sustainable Programs:** Ensure that AFREhealth's programs are sustainable and adaptable to changing healthcare needs across Africa.

Strengths and limitations

A team approach with different professionals was employed in the study, with the valuable combination of lived experience. The study could have benefitted from a higher number of participants. However, the data gathered was rich, and many participants had similar experiences and expressed similar sentiments, thus supporting the credibility of the results. In addition, all authors placed conscious efforts throughout the study. The participants lived in both rural, semi-rural and urban areas, suggesting that the results might be transferable to young adults in the target group independently of demographic context and in similar countries.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Most respondents appreciated AFREhealth contributions and provided recommendations to improve its activities. They emphasized the value of shared knowledge, strong governance, and active community involvement and expressed hope for AFREhealth to continue its work in addressing health challenges and creating sustainable solutions. The feedback gathered from both the key informant interviews (KIIS) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) illustrates the significant role that AFREhealth plays in improving healthcare education and fostering professional

development across the continent. While there are areas for improvement, particularly in communication, visibility, and regional outreach, the organization's impact over the past five years has been positive and transformative for many of its members. Participants discussed ways AFREhealth could improve its programs. They suggested incorporating more hands-on training, explaining that 'virtual workshops are valuable, but practical sessions could make a big difference, especially in clinical skills.' Others supported this idea, recommending AFREhealth hold country-based in-person workshops for members who cannot always access virtual resources. Some proposed expanding into artificial intelligence (AI) education, given its growing role in healthcare. "AI is changing healthcare globally, and AFREhealth should help prepare African professionals for this shift. There are points that more support with grant applications could be helpful, as many members struggle with the administrative aspects of securing funding. Recommendations emphasized the importance of partnerships, the role of education in health initiatives, and the need for sustainable programs to create lasting change. The interviews provided valuable insights into AFREhealth's impact and opportunities for growth. The feedback highlights the importance of measurable outcomes, collaborative efforts, and targeted initiatives to address Africa's health challenges. With continued engagement and a focus on innovation, AFREhealth is well positioned to drive meaningful change in healthcare across the continent

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Ibadan/University College Hospital (UI/UCH) Ethics Committee and the National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) in Nigeria (representing Anglophone countries), as part of the broader AFREhealth Impact Analysis Project. Prior to participation, all respondents were provided with detailed information about the study and written or verbally informed consent was obtained per ethical guidelines.

Availability of data and materials: The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, AFREhealth Secretariat, upon reasonable request.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of Interest was reported by the author(s).

Author's contributions

AFREhealth Secretariat- Impact Analysis Projects volunteers planned the study, collected data, analysed the material, and led the manuscript.

Ghana Team and Research Assistants -AFREhealth Impact Analysis Projects participated in planning, analysis of the material, and contributed to writing and revision of manuscript.

AFREhealth Impact Analysis Projects volunteers participated in planning, analysis of the material, and contributed to writing and revision of manuscript.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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