



## 78<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly (WHA) Side Event Report

### Theme: Strengthening Governance, Coordination, and Investment in African Health Research, Development and Innovation

Conveners: Africa Health Research, Innovation and Development Alliance (AHRIDA) and The Infectious Disease Alliance (IDA)



Date: 19<sup>th</sup> May 2025    Location: President Wilson Hotel, Geneva



## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report summarizes the key takeaways and discussions from the World Health Assembly (WHA) side event on African-led health research, development, and innovation. The event emphasized the need to unify fragmented efforts, prioritize regional and local manufacturing, invest in innovative ecosystems, and strengthen collaboration among governments, donors, and the private sector.

The overarching theme, as articulated by the moderator and Amref Health Africa 's Group Director of Partnerships and External Affairs (Desta Lakew), underscored the critical and urgent need for Africa to bolster its capacity for innovation, manufacturing, and strategic market shaping to achieve health sovereignty and effectively address its unique health challenges, particularly in the context of a significant decline in Official Development Assistance (ODA).

## **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

1. AHRIDA outlined its focus around three strategic pillars: financing, capacity building, and access to health products and technologies. These pillars aim to increase domestic and donor commitments to African health research and development (HR&D), enhance local institutional capabilities, and improve availability and affordability of health technologies. AHRIDA provides a platform for unifying fragmented advocacy, coordination, and policy alignment in African-led HR&D.
2. Africa currently imports more than 99% of the vaccines and 95% of the medicines it uses, yet it consumes nearly 25% of the global vaccine supply. While the number of vaccine manufacturing initiatives has grown from 21 in 2021 to 25 in 2025, concerns were raised about duplication and sustainability. Is this scale of manufacturing necessary, especially without a coordinated approach? Duplication of efforts, particularly at global and regional levels, remains a major barrier to efficiency.
3. The Africa CDC recommends an “end-to-end” ecosystem as the best strategy for sustainable local manufacturing. This approach spans from upstream research and development through to downstream market access, as opposed to partial approaches such as fill-and-finish production. Investing in upstream innovation is essential for reducing dependence on external technologies and for building a truly autonomous R&D ecosystem in Africa.

4. To build this ecosystem, Africa must overcome persistent structural challenges, including regulatory bottlenecks, weak quality assurance systems, high costs for prequalification processes, and limited technological transfer. Addressing the expensive prequalification process is especially critical for local companies to gain market access.

5. Governments have a pivotal role in creating an enabling environment. This involves financial and in-kind contributions such as tax incentives, land provision, or subsidized infrastructure. African governments were urged to implement tax policies on imported health products and remove intra-Africa trade barriers to foster local production and make the continent a true single market.

6. Private sector engagement is critical to sustainability. Of the 25 vaccine manufacturers, 19 are privately owned. Across Africa, 90% of pharmaceutical manufacturers are private entities. Thus, the private sector must be part of the co-creation process. African leaders should engage with the private sector using value-based incentives, not just goodwill.

7. While vaccines receive most attention, the need for other products—including therapeutics, diagnostics, and treatments for non-communicable and neglected tropical diseases—is equally urgent.

8. Building grassroots innovation ecosystems was emphasized. Local innovation platforms—such as Ghana’s Ministry of Health innovation desk—show promise in identifying national priorities and enabling catalytic financing.

9. Investing in R&D and innovation must begin in the education sector. Talent development requires long-term investment in STEM fields. Health innovation contributes to national development and economic growth.

10. Global institutions and donors must work with—not prescribe to—African governments. The call was made to abandon “veterinary prescriptions” and instead co-create solutions based on Africa’s priorities.

11. Shift 5 of the Lusaka Agenda was flagged as the most difficult, yet essential to success. It involves building a resilient ecosystem for medical countermeasures across regions. Priorities set by regional economic bodies (RECs) must inform broader continental strategies.

12. Blended finance emerged as a key solution to address shrinking donor funds. Combining domestic resources with private capital and international support can close the funding gap for innovation and manufacturing.

13. Africa must become a real market—unified and accessible. Harmonizing regulatory processes and enabling cross-border product access will help create a single, competitive African market.

14. The importance of collaboration and collective action was a recurring theme. Africa must unite its fragmented actors under shared priorities and frameworks like AHRIDA.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend special appreciation to our speakers;

1. Moderator: **Desta Lakew**, Group Partnership and External Affairs Director, Amref Health Africa.
2. **Dr. Abebe Genetu Bayih**, Local Manufacturing Coordinator, Africa CDC
3. **Dr. Ogochukwu Chukwujekwu** - Acting Director of the UHC in Life Course – WHO\_Africa Region
4. **Rodrigo Scotini** - Executive Director – Infectious Disease Alliance - IDA)
5. **Dr. Landry Dongmo Tsague** - Director Center for Primary Health Care, Africa CDC?
6. **Caroline Mbindyo** – Chief Innovation Officer – Amref Health Africa



Sincere gratitude to **AHRIDA, IDA, and Amref Health Africa** for their invaluable contributions to the successful organization and logistics of this pivotal event. Their unwavering commitment to advancing HR&D in Africa is deeply appreciated and instrumental to these discussions.

We are also indebted to all the participants that attended both physically and virtually, for their invaluable insights.



## **BACKGROUND**

Africa's health security hinges on its ability to independently innovate, manufacture, and distribute essential health products. Currently, the continent's reliance on imported pharmaceuticals and vaccines—exceeding 90%—underscores a critical gap in its health research and development (R&D) capacity. This deficiency is compounded by underdeveloped R&D infrastructure, a scarcity of skilled researchers, and a historical dependence on external funding that often misaligns with national health priorities.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents a unique opportunity to reshape the market for health innovations, fostering local manufacturing and ensuring equitable access to life-saving products. By offering opportunities for economies of scale, facilitation of trade and investment flows, the AfCFTA establishes a new framework for increased intra-African trade and for attracting investment towards industrialization, diversification, and inclusive development in Africa. To capitalize on this potential, implementation of the proposed, Africa CDC health R&D prioritization and governance mechanism is imperative.

At the World Health Assembly (WHA) 2025, the Africa Health Research Innovation and Development Alliance (AHRIDA) in partnership with the Infectious Disease Alliance (IDA), co-convened a high-level advocacy session to address these critical issues.

## **SESSION OBJECTIVES**

1. To assess existing and required political and technical structures for Africa's continental health R&D coordination and governance.
2. Discuss research and product prioritization
  - Analyze methodologies not only for setting research priorities but also for determining which health products should be prioritized.
  - Explore how AfCFTA can be leveraged to shape the market and support sustainable product development.
3. Address local manufacturing and market incentives
  - Explore strategies to incentivize local manufacturers to produce prioritized health products.
  - Discuss how aligning product prioritization with local manufacturing capabilities can strengthen supply chains and reduce dependency on imports.

4. Strategize financing in an era of limited resources
  - Investigate sustainable financing models that can transition from donor-driven research to local investment.
  - Highlight how effective prioritization ensures that limited funding is allocated to high-impact, context-specific health innovations.
5. Continental and Global Alignment: Generate momentum for including African voices and priorities in global R&D governance frameworks and decision-making platforms.

## **DETAILED DISCUSSIONS**

### **Key Challenges and Opportunities:**

#### **Fragmented Manufacturing Ecosystem and Duplication:**

- Dr. Abebe Genetu Bayih noted a significant increase in vaccine manufacturing initiatives on the continent, now totaling over 25. However, he critically highlighted a pervasive tendency for duplication among sovereign nations. This often leads to crowded markets and inherent inefficiencies, posing substantial challenges to achieving economies of scale and attracting sustained, targeted investment. He provided a vivid example of countries independently planning to manufacture the "exact same vaccine ABC for the country and the region," leading to market saturation and companies opting out due to political decisions overriding market realities.

#### **Persistent Trade Barriers and Restricted Market Access:**

- Discussions extensively revealed that existing intra-African trade barriers severely impede the free movement of locally manufactured health products. Dr. Abebe illustrated this with the arduous journey of an African-developed Mpox diagnostics kit, which had to travel through Dubai and back to Africa to reach an affected country, underscoring that it is currently easier to import products from outside Africa than from within the continent. This significantly undermines efforts to support nascent local industries and ensure timely access.

#### **Complex Landscape of Financing and Investment:**

- **Declining ODA and Fiscal Constraints:** Dr. Landry Dongmo Tsague presented a stark reality: Africa has experienced a nearly 70% decline in ODA, which historically constituted a large portion of national health budgets. This necessitates a fundamental and critical shift towards innovative and domestically driven financing mechanisms. Desta Lakew further emphasized that many national governments are fiscally constrained due to existing foreign debt, severely limiting their capacity to substantially fund R&D initiatives.
- **Lack of Bankable Projects:** Dr. Abebe identified a critical missing link in the financing chain: while capital is available from development financing institutions, there is a shortage of "bankable projects" that effectively attract and secure investment.
- **Strategic Private Sector Engagement:** Rodrigo Scottini underscored that the private sector is an indispensable partner but requires a clear, compelling value proposition, tangible incentives, and communication in a common language focused on "money" and "profits" to engage effectively. Desta added that governments often lack the requisite stewardship capacity to effectively manage and negotiate these complex public-private relationships, often leading to public entities losing out.
- **National Budget as a Priority:** Rodrigo argued that the national budget should be the immediate priority to cover the "big gap," asserting that healthcare is an ultimate priority and a right for citizens, and countries cannot depend on 70% external aid. He also noted potential for new donors from Gulf countries and Asian nations.

### **Neglected Diseases and the Equity Gap in Access:**

- Dr. Monique Wasunna from Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDi) poignantly highlighted the profound challenge of neglected diseases that disproportionately affect very poor populations. She explained that these diseases often receive minimal interest from manufacturers due to perceived limited market demand, despite a significant and urgent "need." This underscores a critical equity gap in product development and procurement. Dr. Abebe concurred, noting that affected individuals often cannot afford even basic diagnostics, let alone more complex ones.

### **Developing Robust R&D and Innovation Ecosystems:**

- Dr. Landry viewed investment in R&D as both strategically vital and inherently difficult for the African continent. Robert Newman, a South African non-profit, stressed the imperative to foster local innovation ecosystems that extend beyond mere technology transfer. He advocated for foundational investment in STEM education to cultivate curious minds and a love for discovery, thereby building a ready workforce for research. He cited Ghana's country innovation platform as a successful model for creating local innovation desks within Ministries of Health to identify needs, issue calls for innovations and provide catalytic financing to local developers.

#### **Challenges in Regulatory Harmonization:**

- Desta and Dr. Abebe consistently underscored that inconsistent and fragmented regulatory standards across African countries create significant hurdles for market authorization and inter-country procurement. Harmonizing these standards is crucial, even in the absence of full ratification of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Desta highlighted the ongoing work on regulatory harmonization as a critical process to make the African Medicines Agency (AMA) operational.

#### **Underleveraged Power of Community and Civil Society Engagement:**

- Dr. Ogochukwu Chukwujekwu (Ogo) reflected that the power of communities and civil society to compel governments to act and ensure accountability for health investments is an underleveraged resource. She cited examples where empowered citizens have successfully driven government action, suggesting that even poor populations are "not powerless" and have a voice.

#### **Broader Scope of Priority Products:**

- While vaccines receive significant attention, Dr. Abebe clarified that the mandate has expanded beyond vaccines to include pharmaceuticals and diagnostics for priority diseases like TB, HIV, malaria, and neglected tropical diseases, and even non-communicable diseases like diabetes (e.g., insulin manufacturing). Dr. Ogo emphasized that the focus should be on all potential medical products, noting that manufacturing of generic pharmaceuticals is already more established than vaccine manufacturing on the continent.

These challenges collectively highlight the urgent need for a cohesive, multi-sectoral approach that transcends traditional health sector boundaries. Addressing these complexities requires strategic collaboration, innovative policy frameworks, and a renewed commitment to fostering an enabling environment for health innovation and manufacturing across Africa.

## **Strategic Priorities and Recommendations:**

Building on the identified challenges and opportunities, the following strategic priorities and recommendations emerged from the discussions, aiming to guide concerted efforts towards a more robust and equitable health R&D and manufacturing landscape in Africa.

### **Incentivizing Local Manufacturing through an End-to-End Approach:**

- **Upstream (R&D):** **Dr. Abebe** strongly advocated for investing in R&D and fostering innovation within Africa to achieve sustainable manufacturing.
- **Downstream (Market):** He also stressed the paramount importance of ensuring sustainable and predictable markets for African-made products to prevent manufacturers from going bankrupt.
- **Preferential Procurement Policies:** **Dr. Abebe** and **Rodrigo Scotini** recommended implementing and strengthening policies that explicitly prioritize African-made products. This could involve countries paying a premium (e.g., up to 25% more) for locally manufactured goods, thereby supporting local industry without necessarily imposing additional tariffs on imported products. “This is a key agenda item for upcoming ministerial meetings”
- **Alleviating Trade Barriers:** **Dr. Abebe** emphasized working with initiatives like the AfCFTA to actively remove barriers that impede the free movement of health products within Africa, citing the difficulties experienced with the Mpox diagnostics kit.

### **Enhanced Harmonisation and Coordination Across Levels:**

- **Continental and Regional Coordination:** **Dr. Abebe** outlined Africa CDC's crucial role in convening member states and coordinating efforts to avoid duplication and guide manufacturing initiatives based on identified ecosystem needs. He described how Africa CDC advises against entering crowded markets.
- **Leveraging RECs:** **Dr. Ogo** strongly suggested leveraging RECs for tighter consensus-building and more effective implementation of health strategies. She noted that RECs can compel compliance more effectively and prioritize regional-specific diseases (e.g., Lassa fever in the ECOWAS region), fostering momentum that is harder to achieve at a continental level.
- **African Pool Procurement Mechanism:** **AfCDC** proposed developing a continental procurement mechanism to consolidate demand from all 55 member

states, thereby providing predictable markets for African manufacturers. This mechanism would align with and complement existing REC procurement mechanisms, establishing a "triangular product prioritization" to avoid duplication and respect regional needs.

### **Innovative Financing and Strategic Private Sector Engagement:**

- **Prioritizing Domestic Investment:** **Desta** and **Dr. Landry** called for a fundamental shift towards greater domestic investment in health R&D and manufacturing. **Desta** emphasized that governments must make their own catalytic investments, no matter how small, to "crowd in others" and retain their voice and ability to manage the process.
- **Exploring Blended Finance:** **Katja Roll** (CEPI) inquired about the role of international partners in blended finance, which **Dr. Landry** described as a new mechanism involving bonds, investment, and equity, crucial for scaling manufacturing and R&D.
- **Clear Value Proposition for Private Sector:** **Rodrigo Scotini** advised developing clear incentives and a strong value proposition for private sector engagement, acknowledging their profit-driven nature and the need to "speak their language" through policies like tariffs and negotiations.
- **Government Stake and Assets:** **Dr. Ogo** underscored that governments must have a financial or asset-based stake (e.g., land, tax incentives, lower tax rates) in R&D and manufacturing initiatives to ensure leverage, ownership, and attract partnerships.

### **Strengthening Regulatory Frameworks:**

- **African Medicines Agency (AMA):** The importance of supporting the operationalization of the AMA and accelerating regulatory harmonization initiatives was emphasized to streamline market authorization and build confidence in African-made products, making it easier for countries to procure from each other.
- **Private Sector Involvement in Harmonization:** **Desta** suggested actively engaging the private sector to leverage their efficiencies and expertise in accelerating regulatory harmonization processes.

### **Addressing Neglected Diseases and Equity:**

- **Dr. Abebe** confirmed the expanded mandate to include pharmaceuticals and diagnostics for priority diseases like TB, HIV, malaria, and neglected tropical diseases, with a focus on reducing costs to ensure affordability for poor populations.

### **Building Robust Local Innovation Ecosystems:**

- Desta articulated the fundamental need to invest in STEM education from early stages to foster a culture of discovery and build the necessary research workforce for the future.
- Robert Newman recommended creating national innovation platforms and "innovation desks" within Ministries of Health to identify specific national needs, issue calls for innovations and provide catalytic financing for local developers to bid on and develop these solutions.

### **Empowering Communities for Accountability:**

- **Dr. Ogo** stressed the importance of organizing and empowering patients and communities to advocate for their health needs and hold leadership accountable for investments, noting that the ultimate beneficiaries are the people themselves.

### **Fostering Internal Interconnectedness:**

- **Rodrigo Scotini** highlighted the need for Africa to create more internal interconnectedness, moving beyond historical connections to ports, to support the exchange of knowledge and reduce transitional costs within the continent.

### **Health as a Driver of Economic Growth**

- Desta emphasized that investments in health R&D and manufacturing are not solely a health sector issue but contribute significantly to the overall economic growth and development of a country. This perspective is crucial for securing high-level government prioritization.

### **Forward-Looking Recommendations and Next Steps:**

To further translate these strategic priorities into tangible progress, immediate and coordinated action is required from all stakeholders. This will involve fostering deeper collaborations/engagements, mobilization of resources effectively, and implementing robust governance mechanisms.

Caroline Mbindyo summarized as follows.

**Develop Concrete Action Plans per Strategic Priority:** Translate the identified strategic priorities into specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) action plans. This will be crucial for moving from discussion to tangible outcomes and ensuring accountability.

**Conduct Comprehensive Mapping of Initiatives and Gaps:** Undertake a thorough mapping of existing R&D and manufacturing initiatives across Africa. This will help identify areas of strength, pinpoint existing duplications, and highlight critical gaps that require targeted interventions and optimized resource allocation.

**Formulate a Robust Stakeholder Engagement Strategy:** Create a detailed and inclusive strategy for engaging all relevant stakeholders. This includes governments, diverse private sector entities (manufacturers, investors), academia, civil society organizations, and international partners, ensuring their active participation, alignment, and shared ownership of the agenda.

**Establish Metrics for Success and an Accountability Framework:** Define clear, quantifiable metrics and an overarching accountability framework to systematically track progress against strategic priorities. This should encompass both quantitative indicators (e.g., investment attracted, production capacity, number of regulatory approvals) and qualitative measures (e.g., policy changes implemented, level of community empowerment, impact on neglected diseases).

**Perform a Detailed Capacity Building Needs Assessment:** Conduct a comprehensive assessment of capacity building needs across the entire HR&D and manufacturing value chain. This spans from foundational scientific research and product development capabilities to regulatory expertise, quality assurance, and effective market access strategies.



**Document and Disseminate Case Studies and Best Practices:** Actively document and widely disseminate successful case studies and best practices from within Africa and other relevant regions. This will serve to inspire, inform, and guide future initiatives, fostering learning and replication.

**Outline a Clear Policy Advocacy Roadmap:** Develop a precise roadmap for policy advocacy at national, regional, and continental levels. This roadmap should identify key legislative and regulatory barriers and outline strategies to create a more enabling and conducive environment for health innovation and manufacturing.

**Explore Digitalization and Data Sharing Opportunities:** Investigate and implement opportunities for leveraging digitalization and robust, secure data sharing platforms. This can significantly enhance R&D collaboration, provide critical market intelligence, and improve supply chain efficiency across the African continent.