

African Conference of  
Science Journalists  
16-19 November, 2020

**SCIENCE**

# SAYANSI

*Telling the African science story*

Issue No. 15

[www.meshascience.org](http://www.meshascience.org)

April 2020



## The unrelenting search for an AIDS vaccine

In this issue

Pan African science  
journalists conference  
plans in high gear

Kenya scores poorly  
in the war against  
malnutrition

Study on corona  
virus funded

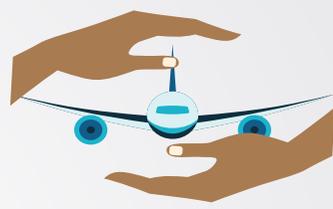
# All The Cover You Need



Health



Home



Travel



Motor



Business



Marine

Resolution offers affordable, tailor made insurance solutions that you can rely on.

Quick Claim Payment | Responsive Care Team | Countrywide Coverage

0709 990 000 | 21777 | www.resolution.co.ke

@ResolutionKE | @resolution\_ke



**T**he Media for Environment, Science, Health and Agriculture (MESHA) was founded in November 2005 in Nairobi, Kenya and is an organisation that provides support to science journalists covering health, development, technology, agriculture and the environment. It does so by offering training workshops, consultancies and encouraging networking through meetings and conferences among journalists, scientists and other stakeholders in Kenya.

The association emphasises on rural journalism and communication.

The idea for the formation of this association sprang up from the fact that there were many organisations and communicators in the fields of agriculture, environment, health and development. However, few organisations in the region bring journalists covering these issues together, for better reporting in the media.

MESHA believes that in a democratic society where science must be answerable to the public, there is need to find new and innovative ways of effective mass communication about the benefits of science, and other areas of concern to the general public.

MESHA aims to ensure continuity, sustainability and consistent coverage of science and development issues as they arise.

### SAYANSI

is a publication of MESHA, P. O. Box 44199 - 00100, Nairobi email: [coordinator@meshakenya.org](mailto:coordinator@meshakenya.org) [www.meshakenya.org](http://www.meshakenya.org),

Mesha Kenya

Mesha Kenya

**Editor**  
Aghan Daniel

**Cover Photo** – Mrs Rosemary Mburu, a HIV and health advocate who is the Executive Director of WACI Health, an African regional advocacy organization committed to creating political will to end life-threatening epidemics and improve health for all.



**Science Journalism:**  
Kenya to host major science journalists' fete

5



**Health:**  
Fighting corona through a consortium

17



**Agriculture:**  
Joy as Kenya suspends contested seed inspection fees

19

# Let governments facilitate free movement of seed under the COVID-19 crisis

*We join others, especially voices from the seed sector in asking governments to facilitate the international movement of seed and not to impose restrictive measures. Given their past records in practicing due diligence, we are confident that seed companies will take all necessary measures to guarantee the health and safety of workers who are involved in the shipment of seed.*

**A**s the world reels under the debilitating effects of a serious health crisis with "SARS-CoV-2" and the disease it causes "coronavirus disease 2019" (COVID-19), now declared by the World Health Organization as a pandemic, it is important that authorities world over think outside the box to secure a food secure world post coronavirus time.

Even as we, science journalists from MESHSA, join the rest of the world in supporting measures to prevent further spread of the virus, we believe that the world's long-term stability rests on several pillars, one of which is food security.

We wholly recognize that unrestricted international movement of seed is critical to ensure food security. Today there is no country that could fully supply farmers with seed of their choice solely from their own production. Seed companies produce and trial seed in different countries all over the world as a way to mitigate the risk of crop failures due to adverse weather conditions.

It is therefore imperative that all African countries allow free movements of seed at this time of the year.

By finding optimal locations for seed production, timing of harvest, and localized expertise, the seed sector ensures the steady supply of seed for farmers everywhere.

Therefore, closing borders or even slowing down the transboundary movement of seeds could create a significant problem in the seed supply chain.

Given the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, a few countries have stopped movement of seeds across borders. This is sad. If this trend is allowed to continue, it will be catastrophic for African countries of unimaginable proportions in the next few months as there will be inadequate harvests a situation that will lead to food insecurity, malnutrition and hunger.

Since seed has not been found to be a causal agent of the coronavirus, we appeal to all Member States to refrain from interrupting seed movement.

If the seed does not move anymore because people are scared of this pandemic, it will be difficult for the continent/the region to recover from the likely repercussions for a long time to come.

Already the situation of food security in Africa is precarious and any further interference with the seed value chain will bode ill for all of us.

We join others, especially voices from the seed sector in asking governments to facilitate the international movement of seed and not to impose restrictive measures. Given their past records in practicing due diligence, we are confident that seed companies will take all necessary measures to guarantee the health and safety of workers who are involved in the shipment of seed.

Let all the concerned authorities all over Africa and the world ensure the most favourable conditions possible for the supply of farmers with all plant productive material they need for a successful harvest in 2020, while respecting all necessary restrictions for the health of all people.

That way, we would have secured a food secure world post the coronavirus pandemic.

## Kenya prepares for African science journalists meet



Science journalists from the region are all ears during a presentation at a past MESHSA congress: Plans are underway to host the 2020 African Conference of Science Journalists in November

By Aghan Daniel | [aghan@meshascience.org](mailto:aghan@meshascience.org)

**P**reparations for the 4th African Conference of Science Journalists to be held from November 16 to 19, 2020 in Kisumu, Kenya are on high gear. The event is being organised by the Media for Environment, Science, Health and Agriculture (MESHSA).

"We are making very good progress with a target of hosting 300 delegates from about 30 countries in Africa and from other parts of the world to the bi-annual event," said Ms Violet Otindo, Chairperson of MESHSA.

Registration for the Conference will open on June 30, 2020 and the Conference registration fee has been put at \$500 per delegate with students paying \$120. Government officials will be charged \$220 with university lecturers paying \$200. Those sponsoring speakers to pay for them \$325 for them to also participate in the Conference. More information about the Conference will be available from March 1 on MESHSA website [www.meshascience.org](http://www.meshascience.org).

According to the Local Organising Committee, organisations have opportunities to sponsor participants, organise workshops, make presentations, or organise field trips at the event to get in touch with the Conference Director at [info@meshascience.org](mailto:info@meshascience.org) or [meshascience@gmail.com](mailto:meshascience@gmail.com) for further details on partnerships. A few pre-conference field visits will be conducted in June.

The first two days of the Conference will be dedicated to field visits. Technical presentations will be made on day three with training for scientists and journalists being done on the last day of the event.

In a nutshell, the program will look like this; Nov 15 – Arrival; Nov 16 and 17 – Field trips; Nov 18 – Technical presentations; Nov 19 – Skill building (training scientists and journalists on how to relate with each other etc). The theme for the conference is Gender and delivery of science in Africa.

But why Kisumu? Kisumu is a beautiful lakeside city located at a hub of the western Kenya tourism circuit. The city is barley four hours drive to the source of River Nile which is cheaply accessible by bus at a cost that does not surpass \$20.

An hour drive away is the beautiful Kakamega Forest. Time, they say, has stood still for the Kakamega Forest, a remnant of the rain forest that stretched all across Central Africa. This beautiful forest is home to various mammals and, bird watching, hiking and rock climbing can be enjoyed here in the serenity of the forest that time forgot.

On your way to Kakamega, are the mysterious Crying Stones of Illesi. It is an important landmark on the near the road to Kisumu barely 45 minutes away. The rock formation resembles a solemn head falling on weary shoulders.

To the south lies the mystical Lake Simbi Nyaima. Located close to Kendu Bay town, Lake Simbi is a tiny Crater Lake measuring about one kilometre in radius. It is a mere one hour drive from Kisumu.

That all these and many more happen around Kisumu City is amazing. MESHSA is already in touch with some tour agents who can undertake a day's visit to the various touristic locations.

Those who love birds even more, should be ready to spare two hours' drive to the Great Rift Valley on the east side of Kisumu, to witness the spectacular ornithologist's paradise that is Lake Nakuru National Park. Stories of various research projects being done in western Kenya are amazing.

Kisumu is home to multitudes of research on HIV. The area boasts of the large Lake Victoria Basin currently home to over 50 projects on climate change and environment. Dairy farming and three large irrigation schemes make Kisumu the perfect venue for this conference.

Farming is the most important economic sector in Kenya, although less than 8 percent of the land is used for crop and feed production, and less than 20 percent is suitable for cultivation.

Kenya is a leading producer of tea and coffee, as well as the third-leading exporter of fresh produce, such as cabbages, onions and mangoes. Small farms grow most of the corn and also produce potatoes, bananas, beans and peas. Kisumu is also known for its fisheries, a sector that is full of stories for journalists from far and wide.

Blogs for the proceedings of the 17th MESHA Science Media café

# HIV vaccine: Scientists call for patience as research continues



**Dr Kundai Chinyenze: There are novel vaccines that have different mechanisms of action that are in earlier phases of testing.**

By Christine Ochogo | christawine@gmail.com



**Christine Ochogo**

**D**ays after the most awaited HIV vaccine clinical trials was stopped, researchers say that there is still hope to get a vaccine which will prevent HIV infection.

"The recent withdrawal of a HIV vaccine, HVTN 702, clinical trial is not the end of finding an effective preventive HIV," two scientists recently told us at a science media café called by the Media for Environment, Science, Health and Agriculture (MESHA).

Dr. Kundai Chinyenze, Executive Medical Director, International Aids Vaccine Initiative (IAVI), clarified that the HVTN 702 vaccine, also known as Uhambo, was stopped due to its inefficiency in preventing HIV infection.

As journalists, we had somehow become enchanted by this news which we had received a few days earlier. We did actually think that scientists were still on it but were not very sure what researches were going on around us.

In her address to us, together with her colleague, Prof Omu Anzala of KAVI and University of Nairobi, Dr. Chinyenze dispelled any fears in us in regards to the stopped vaccine clarifying that the study posed no safety concerns to the volunteers who were under trial.

She said that even though HTVN 702 study had failed and disappointed not only researchers but also donors and the community who had hopes in its success, there are a number of other HIV vaccines under trial and scientists are still working tirelessly towards developing vaccines in a bid to find a solution in curbing the infectious disease.

"As much as it is disappointing to have lost money and time, the HVTN 702 was just one among many other HIV vaccine trials that scientists have been working on and so this does not mean that it is the end of vaccine trials," added Dr. Chinyenze. She observed that there are novel vaccines that have different mechanisms of action that are in earlier phases of testing.

Prof. Omu Anzala of KAVI and the Institute of Clinical Research (ICR) based at the University of Nairobi mentioned that they have learnt a lot following the

**Prof Omu Anzala  
University of Nairobi  
making his remarks at  
the science cafe.**



failed vaccine in South Africa and that here in Kenya, they at KAVI in collaboration with partners in USA and Canada are working on Antibody Mediated Prevention (AMP) study and HVTN 706.

"We scientists are still in pursuit of a safe and globally effective preventive HIV vaccine and other global efforts underway include HVTN 703 and HVTN 704 and HVTN 705 also known as Imbokodo, whose results are expected later this year 2020," Prof. Anzala said, adding that there is no need to give up on ever finding an AIDS vaccine.

He however lamented over decline in funding towards research on HIV but was quick to state that this will not stop any efforts they are putting forward in finding a safe and effective safe vaccine.

"As we await an effective vaccine, we must understand the epidemic and establish a tool which will help in finding out who are getting infected and reach out to them," he observed.

**We scientists are still in pursuit of a safe and globally effective preventive HIV vaccine and other global efforts underway include HVTN 703 and HVTN 704 and HVTN 705 also known as Imbokodo, whose results are expected later this year 2020**

"People who are at risk of HIV infection should make use of PrEP and everyone should embrace test and treat as prevention measures to avoid new infections and spread of the virus - patients who are already positive must adhere to treatment," said Prof Anzala.

That national Institute of off Allergy and Infectious diseases (NIAID) on February 3, 2020 stopped administration of HVTN 702 vaccine after Independent Data and Safety Monitoring Board (DSMB) found that it was not effective.

The HVTN 702 study funded at USD 130 million was launched in 2016 and it enrolled 5,407 HIV negative volunteers at 14 sites across South Africa. The volunteers randomly received six injections of the investigational vaccine or placebo for over 18 months.

Blogs for the proceedings of the 17th MESHA Science Media café

# Search for AIDS vaccine lands me first media science café

By David Ochieng' | odhisdavid59@gmail.com



David Ochieng'

A message on my phone from Aghan Daniel, the secretary of MESHA ([www.meshascience.org](http://www.meshascience.org)) on Wednesday, February 5, 2020 awakened my thoughts about the future of the world without a HIV vaccine. Aghan was inviting to me to attend a two hour media science café at a Nairobi Hotel. In the invite, he simply stated that the meeting had been called to discuss vaccine research in the context of the halt of HVTN702 clinical trials.

As I sat in my university room, two things came to my mind. One, what is a media science café? Two, will I understand what the scientists will talk about given that they used complex terms?

Anyway, I conjured up courage and arrived at the venue 30 minutes before time. Then the introductions were done – and I was happy because I was seeing big names that I had only got to meet through bylines in the newspapers or heard their voices on radio! There was Angela Oketch of the Nation, Ann Mikia,



Rosemary Mburu: She said that the world should not tire as the search for an AIDS vaccine continues

a renowned radio personality in Kenya, Mike Mwaniki, a veteran journalist and Violet Otindo, whom I had only seen on TV, among others.

When the presentations started, Dr Kundai Chinyenze, Executive Medical Director, IAVI stepped forward and showed very simple slides using ordinary language in most of her talking points –

she was very conscious of what could be technical and she explained them using a language that me, a non-science student easily understood.

Her topic was simple, HIV vaccine research efforts and IAVI's role in the search for a safe, effective, affordable and globally accessible vaccine.



Veteran journalists and HIV advocates pose for a photo with Prof Omu Anzala, a senior scientists researching on an AIDS vaccine in Africa

Then came Professor Omu Anzala from Kenya AIDS Vaccine Initiative (KAVI-ICR), University of Nairobi spoke on their roles in HIV vaccine research and prevention in Kenya.

These included clinical trials, research in communicable diseases, non-communicable diseases and the knowledge translation through public forums and targeted events like the science café, that I was privileged to attend for the first time. Prof Anzala spoke simple things off head without any presentation. He was in his element in his simplicity.

Mrs Rosemary Mburu, Executive Director, WACI Health talked on the need for the HIV vaccine. "We can end HIV without a vaccine but we cannot sustain the virus without a vaccine," she said. She also urged for meaningful engagement of local communities for successful research and clinical trials.

To wind it up, a HIV champion, Ms Inviolata M'mbavi, Executive Director, International Community of Women Living with HIV – Kenya Chapter narrated her story of living with the virus for the last 30 years. "When you test HIV positive life will never be the same again," she told us. She noted that the first drugs that were administered to her, almost killed her.

"That drug was a monster," she said looking at Prof Omu Anzala whom she noted had started her on ARVs nearly three decades back and yet the two had never met again till today's science café brought them together.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have hope that a vaccine, to be only administered once in a human being's life, will be found," she said, almost tearfully.

She said that taking drugs daily is not a walk in the park and urged the researchers not to tire in their search for an AIDS vaccine. I gained a lot from this café and learnt that a lot of research is still being done in the quest to find an AIDS vaccine. This will definitely bring smiles back on the faces of those who are distraught because HVTN stalled.

The trials that are on-going include Imbokodo (Phase 2B/3) trial HVTN 705 which is a Mosaic Vaccine Aiming at Protection Against wide variety of global HIV strains. Dr Kundai said that HVTN 705 is a trial in women in five African countries of South Africa, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The trial results are expected in 2022. Besides, up next is the PrEPVacc Trial Phase 2b trial which is testing 2 vaccines regimens to prevent HIV infection and compare a new kind of daily pill for pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), Descovy vs the currently used Truvada. Importantly, this trial tests 2 vaccines regimens to prevent HIV infection and compare a new kind of daily pill for pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), Descovy vs the currently used Truvada. Dr Kundai told us that this is the first efficacy vaccine trial that includes daily oral PrEP in its design in both men and women.



Ms Inviolata M'mbavi

She added that it is planned to start later this year in Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique and Kenya.

As I walked back to the university that day, not only was my fear of scientists slayed but I also felt tantalized by a few statements made at the café. 1. "Without HIV vaccine, we will not end AIDS." - Dr Kundai Chinyenze. 2. "Can we end AIDS without a vaccine? Yes! But we cannot sustain HIV without a vaccine." - Mrs Rosemary Mburu and 3. "When you test HIV positive life will never be the same again." - Ms Inviolata M'mbavi, HIV champion.

The writer is a first year journalism student at the University of Nairobi.

# Table banking give rural women hope against hunger

By Joyce Chimbi | j.chimbi@gmail.com

**T**he World Food Programme 2020 Global Hotspots Report predicts that escalating hunger will challenge sub-Saharan Africa in the first half of 2020.

According to the report, countries that will be severely affected include Zimbabwe, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central Sahel region.

Amidst these dire predictions, food security experts have questioned the role of women in combating hunger across the continent.

"While rural women are the mainstay of small scale agriculture contributing significantly to farm labor force and to the day-to-day family subsistence, they have had much difficulty in accessing land," says Allan Moshi, a land policy expert on sub-Saharan Africa.

Farming on lands they do not own has made it difficult for women to make transformative decisions and to contribute more substantially to food security. But as table banking takes on a new form among rural women in Africa, things are looking up.

"Women are no longer hoarding pennies to share amongst themselves. We meet once a week and in just one sitting, 24 of us can now contribute up to Ksh500, 000," says Irene Tuwei, a member of the Chamgaa table banking group in Turbo, Rift Valley region.

Tuwei says that unlike in the past, women do not have to wait for months to receive their savings.

"We save and borrow immediately. The money is literally placed on the table and distributed among the members in form of loans. Not a single coin is banked which gives us instant loans without providing the kind of security banks ask for," she expounds.

Additional monies are collected in form of penalties from members who have broken group rules such as not attending the weekly meetings, arriving late to the meetings and even walking out during the meetings. Loans given to members also attract interest.

"Eight years ago, none of us had land to call their own. Today, all 24 of us have been able to acquire land through loans received from the group's savings," she says.

Chamgaa table banking group is no exception, Mary Auma from Ahero in Nyanza region explains that the situation is the same in their Ahero table banking group.

"Since joining the group, I have bought a piece of land and cows which support my milk selling business," she says. Auma adds that the loans are attractive since they are given without collateral beyond household assets. "It is rare for members to default on loans as members are mainly neighbors and fellow church members who come together in good faith," she expounds.

Tuwei says that from her two acres of land she can now produce approximately 80 bags of maize cobs which translate to about 40 bags of grains once shelled. From this, she makes approximately Ksh 230,000 per harvest season some of which she ploughs back into the group to boost her savings.

"At the end of the year we share all the money that has been revolving among us for 12 months based on what each member has contributed, additional money gathered from penalties and interest from loans is shared equally," says Tuwei.



**Livestock farming: Table banking has empowered women in certain regions in Kenya to purchase their own cattle**

As the continent continues to be food insecure, gender and development experts such as Francis Kiragu, a lecturer at the University of Nairobi, have attributed this rise to the "systematic and systemic exclusion of women from key decision making processes within the agricultural sector."

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) statistics show that women hold a paltry 14 percent of management positions in the agricultural sector.

Towards sustainable agriculture, Kiragu is emphatic that while the face of farming is still very much female, it will take more women accessing loans, land and information on better farming practices to end hunger, achieve food security as well as improved nutrition.

Additionally, not only do women experience problems accessing land and making critical day-to-day farming decisions, they also have problems accessing credit.

## Participation of women in harnessing food production cannot be overemphasized, particularly in light of the World Food Programme (WFP) 2020 Global Hotspots Report.

"To begin with, the agricultural sector is not receiving sufficient financial support. In Kenya, only four percent of private sector credit is going to the agricultural sector," says Moshi.

According to FAO, women in forestry, fishing and agriculture receive a paltry seven percent of the total agricultural investment.

Even more worrisome, while women in Africa contribute 60 to 80 percent of food, only an estimated five percent of women have access to agricultural extension services.

"Women understand land even better than men because they interact with soil much more closely. We are now seeing more women taking charge of the land and not just as laborers, but also as land owners," says Charles Kiprop, an agricultural extension officer in Turbo.

Kiprop says that women have also become more proactive in accessing key information on better farming practices. "I have been invited by women groups to speak to them on farming practices on many occasions. Women no longer wait and hope that we will pass by their farms, they are now coming to us," he explains.

Participation of women in harnessing food production cannot be overemphasized, particularly in light of the World Food Programme (WFP) 2020 Global Hotspots Report.

Unfortunately, this report is just the recent of a series of alarming reports. Other reports include the Global Report

on Food Crises 2018. This particular report was co-sponsored by FAO, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).

The 2018 report accurately predicted that dry weather conditions would aggravate food insecurity in a number of countries including those in the horn of Africa's pastoral areas in Somalia, parts of Ethiopia and Kenya.

Additionally, the 2018 food and security report indicated that in the absence of conflict and displacement, climate change shocks were the main drivers of acute food insecurity. Similar predictions are included in the WFP 2020 report.

Further, akin to the WFP 2020 report, the 2018 report predicted that "the global prevalence of childhood wasting (low weight for height) is around eight percent, higher than the internationally agreed nutrition target to reduce and maintain childhood wasting to below five percent by 2025."

Moshi says that as more women take over control of their farmlands, "this will not only become their source of food but also income. Having an income is important as it increases their purchasing power."

"Rural women will then be able to buy foods that they do not have therefore ensuring that their households are food secure," he adds.

He notes that the women will also be able to purchase farm inputs. Tuwei confirms that having an income has had a direct impact on her capacity to adhere to better farming practices.

"Five years ago, I could not afford to hire an Ox plough and would rely on the goodwill of neighbors who would first plough their lands and then come to my rescue. Many times they would come when it was too late to plough and plant in time," she explains.

Tuwei further says that she and others in her group can now afford to use quality seeds unlike before when they relied on seeds saved from previous harvests and others borrowed from neighbors.

"With the right tools, women can overhaul the agricultural sector because they have always been the ones involved in the day to day farm activities," says Kiragu.

# Kenyan county presses on with fight against sickle cell

By Gaitano Pessa | gaitanoh@gmail.com

There is a ray of hope for sickle cell anaemia patients in Busia county, in western Kenya following plans to set up a sickle cell disease registry, special clinics and screening services in the county.

The project which is being championed by the International Cancer Institute (ICI) in partnership with the county government will also be rolled out in Bungoma, Trans Nzoia, Kakamega and Vihiga counties.

For a start, the organisation is planning to set up a registry in the county that will provide a framework for sickle cell policy development before embarking on second of setting up the clinics.

A researcher from the institute, Emmah Achieng recently disclosed that the first phase of the project which is still in pilot phase is expected to be ready within six months.

"The program will encourage all sickle cell patients in the county to come out for registration so that the county can have the exact numbers to facilitate establishment of clinics," she said after a meeting with County Health Management team at the Busia County Referral Hospital.

Busia County Director of Medical Services Dr Janerose Ambuchi said it was a privilege to have Busia County among the first recipients of the program.

"Free interaction to the neighbouring Uganda makes people more vulnerable to the disease. The centre will play a vital role in helping our people manage the disease," she said.

Professor Bernard Sorre from ICI and lecturer at Moi University said their target is to manage the transfer of sickle cell gene and have a generation that is free from the disease.

For many decades, sickle cell anaemia in the region have suffered in silence over lack of facilities to address their needs.



Busia County Director of Medical Services Dr Janerose Ambuchi (right) and Busia County Referral Hospital Deputy Medical Superintendent Dr Emma Namulala receive copies on management of sickle cell from Prof Bernard Sorre and Prof Constance Tenge of International Cancer Institute at the facility. Photo | Gaitano Pessa

The patients last year accused the county and national government of neglecting them.

Robert Mulama, a resident of Ganjala village in Funyula Constituency who has lived with the disease for 37 years said most public hospital in the country have expressed lack of commitment to combat the blood disorder.

"We have very few haematologists (sickle cell anaemia specialists) in public hospitals. This has made management of the disease an uphill task. The available hospitals cannot cope with demand of rising cases yet nobody seems to care," said the patient who has so far undergone 402 blood transfusion in bid to battle the disease.

Sickle cell disease is major genetic or hereditary blood disorder that affects most countries in Africa according to World Health Organisation. It affects up to 3 per cent of births and it is estimated that 6 to 9 million infants are born with the disease in the continent.

The condition distorts the shape of the red blood cells, changing them from round to crescent shape which means that they hold less oxygen and are more likely clump together to form clots.

The majority of children with the most severe form of the disease die before age five, usually from infection or severe blood loss.



Planning for people: There is need to sensitize the society on matters of health. Photo | Aghan Daniel

## County arms itself for the fight against cancer

At least 36 medics in Busia County in western Kenya have undergone a three-day induction course on screening of cervical and breast cancer.

The drive is aimed at equipping the health staff with necessary skills to screen cervical and breast cancer rampant among women according to Busia County Director of Medical Health, Dr Janerose Ambuchi.

The staff, drawn across health facilities in the seven sub-counties were taken through theory and practical lessons by oncologists from Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital (MTRH).

Early cervical cancer screening will enable mothers and girls of reproductive age get early diagnosis of the diseases for appropriate management.

The training will be extended to all dispensaries, health centres, sub county facilities," said Dr Ambuchi adding that Busia Referral Hospital will carry out routine screening of cervical or breast cancer and serious cases referred to Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital in Eldoret.

"I urge county residents to take advantage of cancer screening facilities to visit nearest hospitals at least once for cancer screening at a small cost of Sh 100 (1USD). Our staff are now well equipped to handle cancer cases," she added.

A beneficiary of the training Zacharia Muliuro said, "The training I have acquired will enable me help women of reproductive age who need screening services."

Statistics from The Economic Survey show that 14,000 people die every year from cancer, but cancer activists and survivors put the figure of annual deaths at 27,000 per year.

A study by Surgery Journal in 2018 revealed that doctors who don't have palliative care training are more likely to recommend aggressive surgery for patients with life-limiting diseases.

Researchers surveyed 102 surgeons, oncologists, intensive care specialists, and palliative care doctors, asking how they would respond to four different surgical conditions in patients with very advanced cancers.

"Overall, regardless of doctor's age, years of experience or medical specialty, those with less than 40 hours of palliative care training were more likely to recommend major operations as opposed to less aggressive procedures," the study team reported in the journal.

# Kenya lags behind in the race against malnutrition

By Christine Ochogo | christawine@gmail.com

Kenya loses over Ksh 370 billion annually because of poor feeding habits and lifestyle, making it just one of the seven countries that still experience all forms of malnutrition, says a study.

This poor malnutrition ranking globally has led to economic unproductivity given that the country is experiencing triple burden of malnutrition characterised by undernutrition (stunting and underweight), over weight/obesity and micronutrient deficiencies.

A study launched by the ministry of Health in November 2019 dubbed 'the cost of hunger study' indicated that the country loses Ksh 373.9 billion to malnutrition. This amount is equivalent to the revenue allocated to 47 county governments in Kenya in the 2019/2020 financial year.

Veronica Kirogo, Head of Nutrition and Dietetics Division in the Ministry of Health, says that food safety is a concern that need to be addressed to ensure that what we consume as a nation are nutritious.

"Malnutrition is a concern that must now be addressed to ensure that we bring forth children who are healthy and have intellectual potential," added Mrs Kirogo.

She regretted that even though the government has made substantive progress in reducing stunting in children under 5 years from 35 per cent in 2008 to 26 per cent in 2014, 1.8 million (26 per cent) children in Kenya are still stunted and 794,200 (11 per cent) are underweight.

This is according to Kenya Demographic Health Survey 2014 which also indicates that there are about 288,800 (4 per cent) of children who are obese.

The survey also indicates that even though 61 per cent of infants are exclusively breastfed, only 22 per cent of the infants consume minimum acceptable diet.



Governor of Kenya's Nandi County, Hon Stephen Sang (pictured) is one of the four leaders whose areas will benefit from funding of research, policy development and implementation of low-cost nutrition interventions in the country.

In addressing malnutrition status in the country, Nutrition International (NI), a Canadian organization, has now partnered with the national government and four county governments of Nandi, Busia, Vihiga and Makueni to support research, policy development and implementation of low-cost nutrition interventions in the country.

This will ensure that the counties have enough budget allocation for Nutrition Action Plan thus improving the nutrition, health and productivity of the general public.

Speaking in Nairobi during the signing of agreements for nutrition financing with the four county governments, Spicer Joe, the President of Nutrition International, mentioned that the three year agreement will see to it that each county contributes Ksh. 60 million (\$600,000) towards nutrition programs in their counties.

"We at Nutritional International are funding the counties by giving a grant of an equal amount of money each county allocates on matters nutrition at a ratio of 1:1. This means that if a county contribute Ksh. 60 million, we will pump in the same amount," Spicer noted.

The Kenyan situation comes amidst the background of nutritional bliss in Africa. During the just ended 33rd African Union Summit, African countries reported that the continent had made progress toward eradicating malnutrition and stunting but need to do more to hit United Nations malnutrition targets by 2025.

Stunting, the meeting heard, has declined by eight percentage points across Africa since 2000, an advance on one of the UN's 2025 targets. African countries have also shown strong progress toward achieving the target of 50 per cent of the world's children being exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life. The other targets are: halting the epidemic of obesity; reducing anaemia in women of reproductive age; reducing low birth weight and reducing wasting.

The meeting also offered recommendations for governments to strengthen African nutrition outcomes: promote a multi-sectoral approach; position nutrition within food systems; and spend more to combat malnutrition.

By Joyce Chimbi | j.chimbi@gmail.com

High unmet need for postpartum family planning in Kenya could reverse gains made toward reducing maternal and child deaths, according to experts.

The outcry began around the Linda Mama (protect mothers) initiative, a National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF) free maternity programme, which critics say is not comprehensively addressing the maternal health needs of women who access its services.

While the program has provided much-needed quality and free maternal services including antenatal and postnatal care, delivery, and emergency referrals for pregnancy-related complications, postpartum family planning has not been part of the package.

According to Dr. Grace Gakii, a reproductive health expert, "unmet need for postpartum family planning is unacceptably high at 68 percent in the first year after delivery."

## Contraception not covered by national insurer

Evelyn Samba, country director for reproductive and sexual health nonprofit Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung (DSW), says that access to contraceptives is not covered under NHIF and that the government, "has made a commitment to include provision of contraceptives to the NHIF cover by 2020."

She says that this is a much-needed intervention "as one in every five women in a marriage or union" who wants to postpone her next birth, or not have any more children at all, is not using any method of contraception.

June Mwenesi, who is a marketer with a leading insurance company, says that "generally, private health insurance requires women to pay for contraception, just like NHIF."

"Consulting a gynecologist is part of the cover but women have to buy whatever method is recommended and some of the long-term methods can be very expensive going for up to Ksh10,000," Mwenesi added.

Tabitha Karinga, 29, has had three children in quick succession. She was among the beneficiaries of the free maternity services NHIF offered when they were launched in 2013.



## Unmet need for postpartum family planning high - experts

Since then, she has had two more children.

"After my second born I did not think that I could get pregnant so soon after delivery, but it happened. Then I was told that breastfeeding prevents pregnancies, but I still got pregnant again," she says.

## Breastfeeding as a contraception method

Used correctly, breastfeeding can be an effective method of contraception but Karinga was not told after delivery is that it is only effective if her menstrual period did not return, if she was exclusively breastfeeding, and if her baby was less than six months old.

"Mothers struggle with following all these requirements and there is a need to encourage them to use other contraceptive methods," says Dr. Dominic Muchui, a gynecologist-obstetrician at the Rift Valley Provincial General Hospital.

According to the 2014 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS), on average, Kenyan children are breastfed for 21 months and exclusively breastfed for about four months.

KDHS also shows that at one month following delivery, only five percent of postpartum women are using a modern method of contraception.

At one year, only 22 percent of postpartum women who deliver in health facilities report using a modern method of contraception, with Dr. Muchui adding that the figure stands at 13 percent for women who do not deliver in hospitals.

"We need to increase the use of contraceptives particularly within the first year of delivery and this is achievable as mothers are in constant interaction with health facilities," he adds.

KDHS shows that at least 61 percent of women in Kenya deliver in a health facility "but only five percent of these women are using a modern contraceptive method at one month after delivery," says Dr. Muchui.

**Entry points for postpartum family planning**

Experts say that the Linda Mama initiative interacts extensively with women after they give birth. Government statistics show that at least 96 percent of women who receive care under Linda Mama receive antenatal care from a skilled health provider, and that at least 98 percent of children born to these women receive at least one vaccination during their first year of life.

“We need to integrate family planning within our immunization programs and use every interaction with mothers to help them access suitable contraceptive options,” says Bertha Wangari, a nurse at the Kenyatta National and Referral Hospital (KNH).

Research has shown that expanding post-natal checkups and follow-up care, as well as integrating postpartum family planning counseling and services with delivery, can significantly increase the likelihood that women will leave the hospital with a contraception plan or method to delay their next pregnancy.

“As early as possible, pregnant women should begin receiving information on possible contraception methods rather than waiting for the women to approach us months after delivery as in some cases, it is usually too late,” Wangari explains.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) says that for postpartum breastfeeding mothers a contraceptive implant can be inserted less than six weeks after delivery. For non-breastfeeding mothers, an implant can be inserted less than 21 days after giving birth.



**Busy day:** Calls have been made to encourage women in Africa to use other contraceptive methods. Photo | Aghan Daniel

**Family Planning impacts maternal health**

Research by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) shows that if women wait at least 36 months to conceive after the birth of a child, at least 26 percent of deaths of children under five could be prevented. The same research shows that if these women only give birth between the ages of 18 and 35 and had no more than three children, child mortality could be reduced by 30 percent.

In only one year, according to USAID, family planning reduced maternal deaths by 44 percent globally.

Despite the impact that family planning has on improving maternal health, experts such as Dr. Gakii say that the family planning program is facing many challenges, including shrinking donor funding caused by changing donor priorities.

Nonetheless, experts such as Dr. Muchui suggest that the government prioritize family planning in its health programs.

“The country has a 2017/18 budget of 2.63 trillion shillings, one of the biggest budgets in Africa. We can afford to ensure that NHIF provides free postpartum contraceptives,” he says.



**4<sup>th</sup> African Conference of Science Journalists**

**16 - 19 Nov, 2020, Venue: Kisumu, Kenya**

**Contact: [www.meshascience.org](http://www.meshascience.org)**

**Global research on corona virus disease gets a boost**



**A lab technician in a research laboratory in rural Amudat, Uganda at the border of Kenya and Uganda.** Photo | DNDI

By Christine Ochogo | [christawine@gmail.com](mailto:christawine@gmail.com)

Scientists, physicians, funders, and policy makers globally have launched a COVID-19 Clinical Research Coalition to accelerate research on the prevention and treatment of the pandemic in low- and middle-income countries.

This coalition formed by 70 institutions from over 30 countries aims to accelerate desperately needed COVID-19 research in those areas where the virus could wreak havoc on already-fragile health systems and cause the greatest health impact on vulnerable populations.

According to World Health Organization (WHO) Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a new virus.

The disease believed to have originated from Wuhan, a small market in China, has continuously been spreading globally from when it first broke out in November 2019.

The members of the coalition argue that international research collaboration and coordination is needed urgently to support African, Latin American, Eastern European, and certain Asian countries to respond effectively to the worsening pandemic and speed up research adapted to resource-limited settings.

“The coalition brings together an unprecedented array of health experts, including public-sector research institutes, ministries of health, academia, not-for-profit research and development organizations, NGOs,

international organizations, and funders all committed to finding COVID19 solutions for resource-poor settings,” read in part a comment recently published in The Lancet.

One important research response to COVID-19 has been launched already, the World Health Organization (WHO)-led SOLIDARITY trial, an unprecedented global effort. However the authors found that out of almost 600 COVID-19 clinical trials registered, very few trials are planned in resource-poor settings. The authors commit to sharing their technical expertise and clinical trial capability to accelerate COVID-19 research in these settings.



Health workers participate in a clinical trial in rural Kacheliba, West Pokot Kenya. It is important for clinical trials to be conducted in such resource poor settings so that diagnosis and treatments are effective for people in these regions. Photo | DNDi

The scale of the challenge is clearly beyond the scope of any single organization and therefore the coalition will facilitate a coordinated approach, so that all data from all regions can be collected in a similar fashion, pooled and shared in real-time. This will help countries and the WHO to make rapid evidence-based decisions on policies and practice.

"We welcome the launch of this coalition, which takes advantage of existing multinational and multidisciplinary expertise in running clinical trials in resource poor settings, and will help the World Health Organization (WHO) in its coordinating role in the global response to COVID-19," said Dr Soumya Swaminathan, Chief Scientist, World Health Organization.

"Although the epicenter is today elsewhere, we must prepare now for the consequences of this pandemic in more resource-constrained settings or we stand to lose many more lives," added the doctor.

Members of the Coalition call for specific commitments to ensure access, so that effective new treatments are made available as soon as possible in resource-poor settings and are affordable and readily accessible.

Even though more than 70 organizations have joined this coalition, a call has been made to other organizations ready to contribute existing capacity to also join.

COVID-19 disease causes respiratory illness with symptoms such as cough, fever and in more severe cases victims who have been infected may have difficulties in breathing and even cause death.

The disease spread primarily through contact with infected person when they cough or sneeze. It is also spread when a person touches a surface or objects that have the virus.

In trying to control the spread of the disease, one is advised to wash their hands frequently using soap and running water, use sterilizers, avoid touching one's face and keep social distance with people (1 meter or 3 feet).

The pandemic has so far affected over a million individuals globally, causing over 1.3 million deaths. Different countries are trying to take various preventive measures in the help to curb its spread.

In Kenya, the government has come up with measures among them asking people to stay at home and avoid social places, a daily 7.00 pm to 5.00am curfew and making use of masks.

*The pandemic has so far affected over a million individuals globally, causing over 1.3 million deaths. Different countries are trying to take various preventive measures in the help to curb its spread.*

## Relief to seed sector in Kenya as inspection fees are suspended

By Duncan Onduu | [Duncan.onduu@stak.or.ke](mailto:Duncan.onduu@stak.or.ke)

Kenya has granted importers of seed, pesticides and veterinary medicines a temporary six month exemption from inspection fees charged under the Pre-Export Verification of Conformity to Standards (PVoC) programme.

Seed companies say that they have spent over Ksh. 24 million (US\$225,000) since the introduction of this fee.

Consequently, Seeds, Pesticides and Veterinary medicines shall be exempted from the provisions of clause 7 of the Legal Notice number 183 of 5th December 2019. This waiver is to enable the review of this gazette notice.

Under the current requirement which came into effect on 5th December, 2019 on PVoC programme a Certificate of Conformity (CoC) was introduced on consignments coming into the country which were being charged to seed companies (despite the seed already having been certified by a competent authority and given a Plant Import Permit by Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service.

This, notes Seed Trade Association of Kenya (STAK), not only introduced both time and cost to the already arduous task of importing seed but has also alienated Kenya as a seed export destination with some of the large exporters shying away from Kenya. An inspection fee was charged @0.6% of Cost, Insurance and Freight (CIF) value with a minimum \$250 and a maximum of \$2700. A 5 % penalty was also being charged to any goods without the Certificate of Conformity (CoC).

Since the directive came into force, members of STAK have paid over Ksh. 24 million (US\$225,000) additional costs occasioned by storage charges. Some STAK members have had to wait for up to 3 to 4 weeks for inspection to be undertaken because few agencies got approval to perform this task over the period November 2019 to February 2020.



**SEED PEOPLE:** The sector in Kenya looks forward to gazette of a temporary exemption from inspection fees charged under the Pre-Export Verification of Conformity to Standards (PVoC) programme. (Photo: Courtesy African Seed Trade Association)

The new directive had put at risk all the gains made to provide access to improved seed technologies and to promotion of movement of certified seed across borders with the aim of improving productivity and underwriting food security under COMESA seed harmonization arrangements.

The decision has been welcomed by the seed sector in Kenya who have termed it a positive step that will ultimately lead to removal of bottlenecks that the seed sector and farmers by extension had hitherto faced.

The move by the government follows an intervention from the members of the STAK and other stakeholders such as the Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA) who argued that the charges were not necessary given that the seed had already been certified by a competent authority and given a Plant Import Permit by Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service.

In making the directive, the Cabinet Secretary, Ministry of Industrialization, Trade and Enterprise Development, Hon Betty Maina, noted that for seeds there exists a protocol under the International Convention that secures a coordinated and effective action to control introduction and spread of pests, plant and plant products regulated under SPS Protocol between KEPHIS and the regulating agency in the exporting countries.

The seed sector in Kenya, under STAK, looks forward to the gazette of this notice reviewed within the six months waiver period.

**Duncan Onduu is the Executive Officer, Seed Trade Association of Kenya (STAK)**

# Pacesetting: How Zambian companies manage seed wastes



Seed companies at the AFSTA Congress 2020 - seed companies in Zambia have begun an ambitious project to manage wastes. Photo | (AFSTA)

By Aghan Daniel | daghan@afsta.org

In African agriculture, seeds play an important role in food security but may also constitute continental sources of introduction and spread of plant pests and diseases.

Variations in national standards for seed certification and quality control and in quarantine and phytosanitary measures for seed have often been cited as impediments to seed trade in these valuable inputs hence stifling the growth of the sector.

These issues dominate debates and discussions in many seed production and trade related gatherings.

One area that has however been neglected and indeed hidden in the sector is how to effectively manage their wastes, which include but are not limited to expired seeds, waste water, empty chemical containers, seed bags and expired fertilizers.

It was therefore gratifying to see this subject stirred a lot of interest from seed companies during the 20th largest gathering of seed companies in Africa organized by the African Seed Trade Association. Known as the AFSTA Annual Congress, the event, which ended on March 5, 2020 in Livingstone, Zambia, as usual brought together who is who in the seed sector from all over the world.

The delegates noted that whereas most of them are world class producers of seed, managing their wastes remained a challenge as it was mainly done by burying, burning or simply piling them within the firms' compounds.

This could, however, soon become a thing of the past if seed companies could borrow a leaf from an approach being undertaken by the Zambian seed industry under Zambia Seed Trade Association (ZASTA).

According to ZASTA, they have delved into an initiative that deals with maize seed waste management without compromising the environment.

The initiative, which has clearly shown early signs of innovativeness, is hoped to be soon picked up by the rest of Africa, if the early signs are anything to go by.

In the words of Ms. Perrine Nkosi Kasande, a Senior Inspector of Waste Management at Zambia's Environmental Management Authority, the seed companies are transforming their waste management in compliance with the country's Extended Producer Responsibility law, a move that should be embraced by all seed companies in Africa so as to transform waste management.



A section of delegates at the AFSTA Congress 2020: Seed companies have begun to address waste management by collaborating with each other. (Photo | Aghan Daniel)

This law, mainly referred to as EPR (Extended Producer Responsibility) Regulations came into force on 3rd August 2018. Since then, the Regulations is one of the tools that the Zambian Government relies on to manage, in an environmentally sound manner, packaging materials such as plastics and their resultant waste. The seed industry is required to register under this law. Once they do so, they are expected to present to the government a strategy on how they will manage their wastes from the seeds and the containers.

According to the Executive Secretary of the Zambia Seed Trade Association, Dr Watson Mwale, the seed companies have aligned themselves with the global approach by the seed sector in waste management starting with maize seed waste.

"Our action has been informed by the fact that we deal with processes that handle chemicals, packaging materials, expired seeds among other things. All these accumulate into huge quantities, which call for engagement with proper professional conduits that can help the Zambian seed sector to properly dispose these materials that contaminate the environment if left unattended," added Dr Mwale.

How does the approach work? The new waste management solution starts with a seed company ordering waste collection service by a licensed and approved transporter (Geocycle), which then hauls the waste to Lafarge, a local cement manufacturer for disposal. Through Lafarge's Cement Kiln, the hazardous waste is destroyed through co-processing, which results in the generation of heat energy with no waste or by products. Any emissions are strictly monitored by the company.

"We closely monitor the emissions coming from the burning of waste at our central control room to ensure emissions are within acceptable limits for the environment," says Ms. Bwalya Ndhlovu, Alternative Fuel and Raw Materials Supervisor, Lafarge.

In a sector that produces an estimated 1500 tonnes of maize seed waste per year, thus far: 2,816 tonnes of expired seed, 115 tonnes of expired chemicals, 20 tonnes of seed bags, 6 tonnes of plastic containers have been co-processed by Geocycle.

The costs of disposal are estimated at around US\$ 135 per tonne to treat seed waste and US\$ 650 per tonne for empty containers and expired chemicals.

"We are aiming to reduce this cost through adding value to the waste through recycling," says Andrew McNaught, the lead consultant from Tandem adding that the cost reductions are expected to be realized this year with the 2020 focus being on enabling recycling of chemically contaminated plastics (in a safe and environmentally sound way) and adding value to treated seed waste.

This initiative is being spearheaded by Syngenta Seedcare with the support of Tandem Circular Consulting to facilitate research, innovation, design and implementation on the ground. The project involves eight seed companies namely Kamano Seeds, Syngenta, Seed Co., Zamseed, Bayer, Corteva Agriscience, Klein Karoo and AFRISEED.

Like Zambia, many countries in Africa experience challenges in seed waste management as there are limited solutions and service providers for disposing complex and hazardous waste streams.

*The writer is the Communication Officer at the continental seed trade association body, The African Seed Trade Association (AFSTA)*

## Expert: Journalists must stay out of harm's way while covering COVID-19



Ida Jooste

By Christine Ochogo | christawine@gmail.com

Journalists have been cautioned against using traditional ways of news gathering when covering the coronavirus pandemic.

Just like all other humans, journalists are not an exemption and are equally at risk of contracting and spreading coronavirus disease given the nature of their day to day work.

Internews Global Health Media Adviser, Ms Ida Jooste is advising journalists globally to protect themselves fully if they have to leave home which she discouraged. For now she said everyone should stay home and adhere to social distancing. "No story is worth your life hence staying safe during this unprecedented time is paramount," she warned.

Ida was speaking during a cross border science café conducted online where over 70 science journalists from Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Madagascar, Ghana and Nigeria participated.

The science media café was organised by Media for Environment, Science, Health and Agriculture (MESHA) from Kenya, Humanitarian Information Facilitation Centre (HIFC) from Zimbabwe and

Health Journalists Network in Uganda (HEJNU) from Uganda whose team leader, Esther Nakkazi, moderated the session. On board was also Zambia Institute of Mass Communication (ZAMCOM).

She mentioned that it was high time journalists embraced use of information technology such as, zoom, skype, WhatsApp among other social media tools.

The media advisor highlighted that it is important for journalists to also adopt more revolutionary ways to gather news and information such as maximizing phone-in formats and voice recording for interviewees to avoid physical contacts with them, maintaining online production of unfolding story in credible and impactful way so as to keep audience.

Use protective equipment and adhering to the evolving guidance about best practice for safety such as wearing of face masks, keeping social distance, these among others.

During the café the Executive Director, International Community of Women Living with HIV, Kenya Chapter, Ms Inviolata M'mbavi, said lack of information flow from government has stifled access to medication and health services for persons living with HIV.

She added that all the attention is now focussed on COVID-19 at the expense of other ailments. However she noted that some facilities had devised ways of serving them.

"The COVID-19 situation is complicating lives of majority of HIV patients and this has increased their stress levels since they are unable to access antiretroviral therapy (ART) and other medication," she added.



## The Kenya Science Journalists Congress III Sponsors



**Now Available**  
www.meshakenya.org



## Kenya Science Journalists Congress III REPORT

*Establishing effective relationships between science journalists and scientists.*

