

## CONFERENCE NEWS BULLETIN

DAY ONE

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# Journalists urged to embrace social media



**MESHA Vice Chairperson,  
Allan Obiero**

**By Clifford Akumu**  
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**A**frican science journalists have been urged to embrace the use of social media in disseminating vital information on new research and innovations in their day to day reportage.

Allan Obiero, the vice-chairperson of MESHA said that social media platforms, among them Twitter, Zoom and Facebook, are a few frontiers that could be adopted by journalists in highlighting key issues in research and innovations.

"Social media is no longer just a space for fun but a place where serious matters in science can take place and bring about real positive impact," said Obiero during the opening ceremony.

He added that scientists' work should reach the market, and the best way is through African journalists who have regular science beats.

While acknowledging the new normal occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, he noted that the virtual meet will act as a 'quality story time' for journalists across the continent.

"We hope we shall have interactive sessions where journalists' will be able to source enough quality stories for publication since we have a number of exciting topics lined up," he said.

Now in its fourth year, the bi-annual African conference of science journalists, has brought to fore the need for sustained journalist scientists interactions across the continent.

He added that MESHA prides itself in connecting scientists and journalists to project key issues geared at creating positive impact to the society.

"We are still true to our philosophy of working with organizations' that do real science. And this virtual conference will go a long way in demonstrating this," noted Obiero, who termed the conference a milestone aimed at bridging the huge gap that existed between scientists' and journalists.

"Fifteen years down the line since we started this journey, there is still a lot of work to do," he said. The growth in numbers of science journalists, he noted, called for more effort to be put in this field if MESHA were to remain a centre of excellence for science journalism. He further stressed on the need for long term partnerships beyond the event based ones on financial and technical aspects in order to sustain higher science reporting standards in Africa.

"MESHA seeks to use this virtual event to showcase to Africa scientists and journalists what a true science journalist association can achieve with just a little support. We thank all our partners and members for creating a conducive environment for the Secretariat to excel."

The conference runs from November 17 to 20, 2020 and brings together more than 250 participants across the continent.

# Kenya launch HIV self-testing vending machines

By **Agatha Ngotho** | [angotho@gmail.com](mailto:angotho@gmail.com), **Mike Mwaniki** | [mikemwaniki2016@gmail.com](mailto:mikemwaniki2016@gmail.com)

**K**enya is set to launch HIV self-testing electronic vending machines (EVMs) on December 1, World Aids Day.

Dr Catherine Ngugi, Head, Division of National AIDS and STIs Control Programme (NAS COP) said the launch will be held in Kajiado County.

"The machine will function just the way you can buy a chocolate from a vending machine," she explained in her opening remarks at the Fourth African Conference of Science journalists on November 17, 2020. Dr Ngugi revealed that the agency is working closely with different organisations to enhance HIV testing uptake.

"This is part of our efforts to scale-up the use of self-tests in the private sector and specifically, in workplace settings," she said.

Among the partners are Farmer's Choice Limited Kenya and OraSure Technologies Inc, which will implement a demonstration pilot of two self-test EVMs.

"Farmer's Choice Limited has over 1,500 staff, a majority of whom are men, self-tests will be dispensed at no cost to the personnel at the company," she added. According to Dr Ngugi, the use of EVMs in HIV care and treatment programmes is not new.

"Condom vending machines have been implemented globally in locations such as public restrooms, petrol stations and campus halls of residence. They provide discretion, enhance privacy and in turn, reduce users' feelings of embarrassment and fear or risk of stigma from health providers in the community," she explained.



**A user gets HIV testing kit from a vending machine**

They can, therefore, be of value to the overall health system by facilitating and increasing access to key commodities, providing opportunity for health programmes to focus more on quality of services.

Dr Ngugi hopes that the EVMs will reverse the dropping number of people testing for HIV caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the project, if successful, will be rolled out countrywide. She also warned that the focus of information flow has moved from other killer diseases to almost solely COVID-19, and this could impact on how the disease is managed.

"As agenda setters, the media can find a balance to report on COVID-19 as well as continue telling stories around HIV and other life threatening diseases so that we do not negate the strides made prior to this pandemic," she added.

"Globally, Kenya has one of the largest HIV epidemics with about 1.5 million people living with HIV of these, about 1.4 million are adults and 106,807 are paediatrics aged 0-14 years," she said. Overall, the national prevalence is 4.9 per cent, data shows a huge gender disparity with double the prevalence among women as compared to men at 6.6

per cent and 3.1 per cent respectively. At the same time, of the estimated 106,807 children aged less than 15 years LHIV, only 68,681 are on ART.

The self-testing kit will be part of a series of safer and more effective treatment regimens, which also include phased approach of ART optimisation/ treatment to phase out Non Nucleoside Reverse Transcriptase Inhibitors - a class of ARVs (NNRTIs), as well as full implementation of multi-month dispensing of three months or more of HIV treatment.

"Up to three multi-month dispensing of ARVs has been considered for all PLHIVs regardless of age and viral load status.

Dispensing will be based on assessment of patient needs and availability of adequate ARVs," Dr Ngugi said.

She added, "Infants born to HIV infected mothers now have access to prompt HIV diagnosis and treatment. A national system has been in operation for the past decade.

However, only about 70 per cent of infants have access to these HIV testing facilities. As media, we need to ask why as we interrogate and tell change stories that will ensure the 30 per cent infants get the healthcare they require."

# Journalists challenged to network, boost skills at continental meet

By Carol Otieno Miyawa | lolwecarol@gmail.com

Journalists have been urged to take advantage of an ongoing conference to enhance their capacity in science matters and make a difference for the practice of science journalism in Africa.

Dr Kathryn Toure, the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Director at International Development Research Centre (IDRC) said the conference and its theme of 'Bolstering the Role of Science Journalism during a Pandemic and an *'Infodemic'* could not have come at a better time, when the world is grappling with COVID-19 and the accompanying fake news.

She was speaking during the opening session of the Fourth African Conference of Science Journalists organised by the Media for Environment, Science, Health and



**Dr Kathryn Toure, Regional Director, IDRC Eastern and Southern Africa**

Agriculture (MESHA). The conference that is being held virtually has congregated over 400 journalists from across Africa.

Dr Toure challenged science journalists to address pertinent questions in the current circumstances.

"For example, how are you adapting to the new ways of working? What are the challenges and how are you overcoming them? And how will the lessons learnt now reshape journalists and journalism as a profession going forward?" she posed.

She urged journalists to integrate concerns around gender, diversity, equity and inclusion in their organisations and in their reporting.

Dr Toure also called on journalists and scientists to use the conference to network and learn from one other.



**East African Conference of Science Journalists**

**23 - 26 Nov, 2021, Venue: Kisumu, Kenya**

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# Africa media centre launched to improve science reporting



Participants absorbing science being communicated at a recent event.

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**S**cience Africa has launched the Africa Science Media Centre to help improve the coverage of science across the continent.

While launching the centre at the ongoing Fourth African Conference of Science Journalists organised by the Media for Environment, Science, Health and Agriculture (MESHA), Daniel Otunge, the institution's director, said it aims to support accurate, evidence-based media coverage across the continent.

"No country has ever developed without mainstreaming its research and development policies in its agenda. This centre will ensure we have effective, evidence-based science reporting" said Mr Otunge during the virtual event that brought together more than 165 participants from across the continent.



**Daniel Otunge,**  
Director, ScienceAfrica

The centre will work in collaboration with research institutions, experts, scientists and journalists to disseminate impactful innovations across the continent.

The centre will be based in Nairobi but will serve the entire continent, said Otunge.

The Africa Science Media Centre is a partnership between Cornell Alliance for Science and the Kenyan-based Science Africa that runs an online publication. "The African arm will act as a franchise, there are already other science media centres in operation," said Otunge.

A report published by the UK National Commission for UNESCO in 2012 laid bare the relevance of a good and independent science media coverage in Africa.

The report that sought views of 35 journalists and scientists in African and European organisations stressed the need for a science news service for Africa that could improve the quality and relevance of the continent's media coverage of scientific research. In United Kingdom, Canada, Japan and Australia there are science media centres already operating.

By 2014, for example, several new ones were being planned or created in Germany, Denmark and United States. But how does Africa Science Media Centre plans to avoid the criticisms and accusations of bias levelled against a similar initiative based in the UK?

"The centre will be independent in its operation and budgeting," said Otunge. However, for such centres to succeed, MESHA Secretary General Daniel Aghan stressed the need to develop cohesion between the scientists and journalists to work as equal partners. "Scientists need not to work in isolation. It is very important to engage with journalists as equal partners for the good of science reporting expansion across Africa," he said.

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***The Africa Science Media Centre is a partnership between Cornell Alliance for Science and the Kenyan-based Science Africa that runs an online publication.***



Despite great progress since the early days, the HIV response is still failing children. (Source: UNAIDS)

## Protect children from HIV and COVID-19, experts say

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Only half of children aged below 15 years living with HIV are receiving antiretroviral therapy globally, a scientist says.

Dr Irene Mukui, the HIV Access and Medical Affairs Leader at DNDI Africa regional office in Nairobi, said children generally have less access to HIV testing and less access to HIV treatment compared to adults.

Dr Mukui said globally only six out of 10 newborns get tested for HIV by two months of age. She said in total, about 1.8 million children are living with HIV, and 1.4 million of them – 63 per cent – are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Dr Mukui said over 300 children and adolescents die every day from Aids-related causes while about 400 children are infected with HIV daily.

“Currently, 90 per cent of HIV infections occur through mother to child transmission, with 90 per cent of paediatric infections occurring in sub-Saharan Africa,” said Dr Mukui on November 17, 2020, at the Fourth African Conference of Science Journalists organised by the Media for Environment, Science, Health and Agriculture (MESHHA) and held virtually.

While only 54 per cent of the children are on treatment, about 82 per cent of their mothers are on ART, she said.

“The paediatric ARV market is particularly vulnerable and complex because children are few (less market) and they require different dosages and dosage formulations as they gain weight,” she explained.



**Dr Irene Mukui**

Dr Mukui said generally, treatment for children can be complicated and more expensive.

“You require a combination of pills or liquids or pills and liquids. Some pills can also be difficult to swallow and some liquids have unpleasant taste,” she said.

Dr Mukui further noted there are fewer studies in children and as a result, fewer combined treatments for children compared to adults. She noted the HIV diagnosis, testing for children needs to be more available and closer to children.



**Dr Catherine Ngugi, Head of NASCOP**

“Medicines specifically adapted to the needs of children need to be developed and kept at an affordable price,” she said.

“Government, non-governmental organisations, research partners, health experts, civil society and the media need to advocate strongly for the development of child-friendly combinations to make treatment easier for children,” Dr Mukui added.

The situation is not different in Kenya.

Head of the National Aids and STIs Control Programme, Dr Catherine Ngugi, said children and adolescents are disproportionately affected due to unfavourable treatment formulations, which are intolerable to them.

Dr Ngugi said the government is working to end the problem.

“The government is now investing more in innovative testing approaches such as self-testing. Infants born to HIV-infected mothers now have access to prompt HIV diagnosis and treatment,” she said.

Although NASCOP statistics indicate the number of children living with HIV has reduced from 191,840 to 106,000 between 2015 and 2020, Dr Ngugi is concerned that if the disease is ignored as all interventions are directed to COVID-19, the country will be sitting on a ticking time bomb.

“Every year, we lose about 4,000 children to HIV. We need to address the needs of children living with HIV, especially during this pandemic,” she said.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), without access to testing and treatment, 50 per cent of children with HIV will die by the age of two, and 80 per cent will not live to their fifth birthday.

WHO recommends that infants born to mothers living with HIV are tested for the virus by two months of age, during breastfeeding, and when breastfeeding ends, given continued risk of transmission during this period.

Older children, especially offspring and siblings of persons infected with HIV, should also be tested in high prevalence regions. Community-based outreach and testing can improve access to testing while mitigating HIV-related stigma.

In 2015, NASCOP indicated that 16 children acquired HIV through motherchild transmission daily. This was still a reduction from 66 in 2009.

Today, statistics show an increase in vertical transmission from 8.3 per cent in 2015 to the current 11.5 per cent.

Further, HIV related deaths among children remain high at 14 per cent.

## Partners



# An eye-opening conference



MESHA members follow proceedings of a previous conference

By Ruth Keah | [rkeahkadide@gmail.com](mailto:rkeahkadide@gmail.com)

It is that time of the year again when science journalists gather to share their experiences in science reporting.

Normally, journalists and scientists from across Africa meet physically in November to learn from each other. At the end of the event, journalists get an opportunity for field work and produce stories.

Last year's event was held in Mombasa, Kenya. But this year's conference is different. It is virtual, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, which came with many restrictions.

Journalists got the opportunity to learn from experts from across Africa. In one session, journalists shared their experiences and challenges in health reporting.

Lerato Matheka from Lesotho said some challenges include the long process it takes to get views of policy makers and lack of real-time data.

She said policy makers only look for journalists when they are conducting workshops and public relations activities, and in most cases, political stories get the upper hand in publishing.

Frida Leyina from Cameroon, who has spent 10 years writing health stories, said her biggest challenges is reporting about malaria, a disease that most Cameroonians believe can be treated with traditional medicines. This, she says, makes it tough for her and other journalists to convince them to seek medical attention.

Kemo Cham from Sierra Leone wants to resign from full time employment as an editor to become a freelancer simply because he is tired of editing and re-writing the same stories over and over again.

He complained that Sierra Leonean journalists take the job as a stepping stone to greener pastures, hence lack of professionalism in the field.

Irene Shone from Botswana had a different experience. She says science journalists enjoy the journey. The newspaper she works for has dedicated a whole page for health stories, including HIV/Aids.

Vivian Agaba, a journalist from Uganda, says science journalists are lucky in her country as the government is very cooperative when it comes to giving out information on health matters.

'In fact, we have dedicated the whole of December to reporting on HIV and Aids matters,' she said, adding that the experience has inspired young journalists, who are now showing interest in writing science stories.

Her sentiments were echoed by Esther Nakkazi also from Uganda, and founder of Health Journalists Network of Uganda.

Her advice for science journalists is to never give up; to commit to the course of mentoring young journalists to do science stories and make it work.

*Journalists got the opportunity to learn from experts from across Africa. In one session, journalists shared their experiences and challenges in health reporting.*

## The Media for Environment, Science, Health and Agriculture

The 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.

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

We thank all the MESHA board members for a job well done, Mildred Mugambi of the National Commission of Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) for sticking with the MESHA team in putting together the event. I also thank the translators led by Kasongo Mukalay and Sisko Tshikala for a sterling performance. Our gratitude also goes to the Chief guest at the opening ceremony, Dr Catherine Njuguna Head, NASCOP, Kenya and Dr Thabbie Chilongo, Director, Centre for Agricultural Research and Development, Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Malawi. We celebrate all the presenters, moderators and all the participants. You have been great. The editorial team of Ms Nduta Waweru and Godfrey Ombogo plus Clifford Akumu, to you we say. Finally, we thank all our partners, IUCN, DNDi, WWF-K, TRAFFIC, ScienceAfrica and InfoNile, you were a great revelation. – Conference Director, Aghan Daniel

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