


## Letter to the Editor

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### Health Policy and Systems Research in Sub-Saharan Africa during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has created unusual circumstances and demonstrated to the globe the importance of evidence-based knowledge in combating and overcoming diseases [1]. Evidence plays a crucial role in influencing public health practice. Although the value of health information exchange is irrefutable in preventing and solving health issues, there is a scarcity of data to inform the public and policymakers, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa [2]. A lack of relevant knowledge about the disease and related factors contributes to misunderstanding and distrust among the population and government. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, rumours circulated that black people could not contract the disease and that hot weather, hot drinks, and certain consumables could prevent infection [3]. Such misinformation prevents the public from taking appropriate preventive measures and encourages incorrect behaviour, thus increasing the spread of the infection and eventually contributing to poor health outcomes [4].

Policy and systems research in health is crucial to address local health issues, health vulnerability, and inequities. However, Sub-Saharan Africa has been shown to generate the lowest number of publications worldwide in biomedical research [2]. In other words, health issues on the continent are poorly documented, resulting in a lack of data needed for advocacy and the implementation of informed policies for population protection. Qualified healthcare and public health workers are trustworthy sources of knowledge and information. However, they face numerous challenges when conducting research. First, due to the limited number of qualified healthcare providers and the high volume of patients seeking treatment, healthcare professionals have a hectic schedule that makes conducting research difficult. Other contributing factors include a lack of appropriate facilities, scientific education, research institutions, and funding [5]. As a result, doctors spend only small amounts of time considering or conducting research, resulting in a paucity of data to inform and influence policymakers to enhance health systems on the continent with the highest global disease burden. Therefore, it is critical to bolstering health policy and systems research (HPSR) among healthcare providers in Sub-Saharan Africa.

HPSR attempts to better understand how communities organize to achieve common health goals and how diverse players engage in policy and planning processes to influence policy outcomes [6]. Additionally, HPSR is essential for providing policymakers with relevant and accurate information. In this regard, healthcare providers are well-informed sources who can effectively respond to health issues of concern for their communities. In addition to their daily activities, they can conduct research and provide comprehensive data to shape health systems via evidence-based advocacy, influencing evidence-informed decision-making.

Furthermore, it is essential to harness healthcare students' research skills. Teachers can play a significant role in supervising and equipping students with more health policy and systems tools along with epidemiological design. As a result, students can conduct high-quality research under the guidance of their teachers even when healthcare providers cannot due to

their hectic schedules. Interestingly, a teaching research program aimed at improving the research potential of medical students in an African country recorded excellent results and showed that medical students were valuable human resources for health promotion [7]. Therefore, empowered students can also conduct high impact studies and make meaningful, evidence-based recommendations while considering their relevance and convenience in the face of local health challenges. Such recommendations include accessible, high-quality, people-centred and integrated health services that are critical for achieving universal health coverage.

Encouraging further studies in HPSR would have a substantial impact on the capacity to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and other diseases as well as improve the health system in Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. Healthcare providers and students can correctly detect bottlenecks that lower health systems performance and hinder better responses to health challenges. Countries must support research and develop health research agendas to guide researchers in addressing critical health issues that fit national health priorities. In this respect, local researchers must be well equipped, during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, to write policy briefs and communicate evidence-based findings in a targeted and action-oriented manner that can adequately reform health systems to respond to community needs. Furthermore, establishing connections between researchers and policymakers would be impactful as it would facilitate policymaking and implementation. Finally, recommendations relevant for and adapted to the local context are equally important. Such recommendations will provide a course of action to the community and decision-makers necessary to foster health systems performance and thereby improve health equity and health promotion.

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