FORUM

"PREPARING FOR DISASTER SAVES LIVES"

Africa is facing a series of significant challenges including demographic, economic, socio-political, and climate changes. Africa needs to take on this complicated situation through a process that centers on training professional health workers, to build resilient communities and health systems to respond to the disasters caused by environmental risks and human causes.

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A COMPLICATED SITUATION

In the last twenty years, Africa has been going through a series of demographic, economic, and socio-political changes that make the situation in its countries so unstable that it is difficult to ensure the people the security and public services of primary importance.[1] Increasingly frequent environmental disasters are added to the situation. Though Africa as a continent contributes only 3% to global emissions, it is the area most exposed to the negative effects of climate change.[2] According to the report *"State of the Climate in Africa 2021"*, climate change in Africa is reflected in a constant increase in temperature and increasing natural disasters:[3] heavy rains, floods, tropical cyclones, droughts, fires, and heat waves are among the disasters that are cyclically affecting African regions, obstructing positive development and creating thousands of "climate refugees."[4] In places like the Horn of Africa and certain provinces in Angola, extreme drought has reached critical levels and the people have been forced to flee to neighboring countries due to hunger and the lack of water sources.

Another problem that Africa is facing is the spread of conflicts and political violence, worsening the situation of already fragile countries. For example, the conflict in Ethiopia has been defined as one of the "deadliest in 2022" which has led to over 600,000 civilian deaths and 2 million displaced people in the Tigray and surrounding regions.[5] The very recent conflict between Sudan's top military leaders plunged the already beleaguered country into chaos yet again, forcing more than 2 million people to flee. The situation is made even more dire because many African countries have to face more than one of these crises at the same time. For example, Mozambique was struck in 2019 by two tropical cyclones (Idai and Kenneth), and since 2020 has been undergoing a severe humanitarian crisis in the Capo Delgado area, where "internal displaced people" have fled Islamic terrorism.

PREPAREDNESS SAVES LIVES

In a complex situation like that in Africa, health personnel play an essential role in building resilient communities and health systems to respond to the disasters caused by environmental risks and human causes.[6] This is why all health professionals must be suitably prepared and equipped to work effectively during emergencies, especially in limited-resource settings.

Recent studies, however, show how the long-standing shortage of human resources in many African countries and inadequate training capacities are still serious obstacles to the growth and development of health personnel in response to the needs of the people, including during emergencies, due to delays and complications in both response and recovery phases.[7][8]

This is despite the people's desire to be trained and improve their education.[9][10] CUAMM has seen this directly in the countries afflicted by emergencies, both in the spontaneous mobilization of health workers and others, including community health workers and young activists eager to be helpful during an emergency. In Mozambique, after Cyclone Idai passed, it took just a few days to form teams of volunteers working to respond to the most pressing needs, such as wound care and educating the people about the risk of epidemics, using human resources already on site and involved in community programs for HIV prevention and care.[11]

From experience gained in the field and from the evidence seen on a global scale, there is an increasingly clear need for preparation to manage crisis situations, especially in low-resource settings like in Africa. this process needs to center on training of health professionals and their preparedness to manage crises within the health units and to integrate their work with community-level responses.[6]

JUST IN TIME IN LOW RESOURCE SETTINGS

Starting from these considerations, *"Just in Time in Low Resource Settings"*[12] was launched, a training developed by Doctors with Africa CUAMM with the Research Center in Emergency and Disaster Medicine (CRIMEDIM) of the University of Piedmont "Orientale."[13] Organized in accessible online modules on an e-learning platform, the course was created with the goal of training participants in the basic principles of disaster medicine and public health emergencies and to teach standard operating procedures before (preparedness), during (response), and after (mitigation) a disaster.

The course is currently offered in sub-Saharan African countries. Its intended targets have responded with immediate interest.

From March to May 2023, more than 500 people completed all the modules of the training and passed the final test, earning a digital participation certificate. The data collected about the types of professions of those who registered is interesting: 31% are doctors, followed by nurses (13%) and students of medicine and health professions (12%). The remaining 44% are from other professional categories involved in the local health system including public health experts, environmental health officers, humanitarian activists and coordinators, nutritionists, community health officers, clinical officers, and risk communication officers. It is noteworthy that the course attracted the interest not only of those working in health but also of other professionals who work in close contact with countries' communities and health systems.

Though the course originated as an experiment, it had considerable success, confirming the high interest in emergency management and the importance of training at the basis of CUAMM's training plan. Ninety-eight percent of those who answered the evaluation questionnaire felt that *"Just in Time in Low Resource Settings"* was interesting and useful for their educational and working background.

BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR RESILIENT SYSTEMS

Starting from the needs of a local area, responding to the needs of the people, and trying together to find the best responses that lead to concrete solutions – this is the approach that Doctors with Africa CUAMM would like to maintain in the realm of emergency management, starting from the continued development of training African professionals.

According to the WHO 2030 Agenda for human resources employed in the health sector, giving more resources and energy to training health Professionals would reduce risks to the health of the most vulnerable groups and improve the confidence of health workers to respond effectively to disasters: from being able to come "prepared" and quickly respond to a crisis as it happens, to the capacity to absorb the crisis, adapt, and change.[6]

In order to achieve this, investments must be made in quality, long-term training that can be easily accessed in online/offline modes, and which can adapt to the African context to bolster the skills of professionals and the local communities in order to build the foundations for rapid, efficient, and immediate responses to emergencies.[14]

To these ends, CUAMM will continue to focus its efforts on working in the field and strengthening the ability to adapt so that at the end of an emergency, the lessons learned solidify and lead to creating resilient communities and health systems.

NOTES

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12 Doctors with Africa CUAMM: https://doctorswithafrica.org/en/whats-new/news/just-in-time-in-low-resource-settings/
13 CRIMEDIM: https://crimedim.uniupo.it/
14 NCBI, *Nurses in Disaster Preparedness and Public Health Emergency Response*, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK573904/