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Fourth Global Health Systems Research Symposium features innovative research on improving maternal and child health in Africa

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It is women and children across developing countries who suffer most from the shocks and stresses to health systems. In South Sudan — a country ravaged by conflicts — limited infrastructure, lack of health information, and severe shortages of health personnel contribute to high levels of maternal and child mortality. Outbreaks of infectious disease and epidemics have similar consequences — the impact of Ebola on maternal and child health in West Africa is one example.

These were some of the topics of discussions led by researchers from the [Innovating for Maternal and Child Health in Africa](#) (IMCHA) initiative at the [Fourth Global Symposium on Health Systems Research](#) held in Vancouver from November 14–18, 2016.

IMCHA — a CA\$36 million initiative funded by Global Affairs Canada, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and IDRC — aims to develop practical solutions to health system challenges by generating new knowledge about how interventions work, for whom, and under what conditions. Nineteen research teams made up of African and Canadian researchers are exploring how such interventions are implemented, and how they can be scaled up to improve health equity for women and children in 10 African countries.

Panel focuses on opportunities and challenges of improving maternal and child health in Africa

The five-researcher panel shared emerging findings from their research projects that seek to implement innovative solutions to improve maternal and child health in Africa. These solutions touch on diverse aspects of health systems, including community and social enterprise business models to improve maternal/child health coverage, low-cost interventions, training to improve maternal and child health outcomes at health facilities, and evaluating health financing models to inform health policies.

The panel generated a rich discussion on the need to improve understanding of the unique health systems in African countries. The five presentations highlighted not only the innovations in interventions, but they also demonstrated the importance of engaging with policymakers throughout the project cycle, from project formulation to implementation. A unique feature of the IMCHA research teams is the involvement of a “decision-maker” — a local, national health policymaker — in each research team to work towards the uptake of research and evidence.

The following presentations were made by the researchers on the panel:

- Providing training and skills upgrading to associate clinicians in Tanzania to meet the demand for life-saving obstetrical procedures for mothers and their newborns (Dr Senga Pemba, Tanzanian Training Centre for International Health). [Learn more about IDRC's project to improve obstetrics in Tanzania.](#)
- Identifying incentive models to support volunteer community health workers in South Sudan and Uganda (Dr Jenipher Twebaze Musoke, BRAC Africa). [Learn more about IDRC's project to improve health indicators in South Sudan.](#)
- Implementing the "Malawi Neonatal Package of Care, including a number of low-cost interventions to reduce neonatal mortality at the health facility level in Malawi (Dr David Goldfarb, University of British Columbia). [Learn how an IDRC project is helping reducing neonatal mortality in Malawi.](#)
- Helping governments in Burkina Faso and Mali assess the impact of results-based financing to health service providers (Dr Laurence Touré, Miseli, Mali). [Read more on how IDRC is helping increase equitable access to health services for the poor in Mali and Burkina Faso.](#)
- Enhancing the Bajenu Gox Initiative, a community-based health worker program in Senegal that supports women during the pre-natal, delivery, and post-natal periods (Dr Boubacar Camara, Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, Senegal). [Read more on the Bajenu Gox Initiative.](#)

Building leaders in health systems

One of the main objectives of IMCHA is to build a cohort of young researchers who will become future health system research leaders. In his comments related to the symposium, the president of CIHR [Dr Alain Beaudet](#) underscored the need to continue building research capacity to help develop a cadre of solid investigators in health systems research and health economics, in addition to supporting implementation research and delivery science.

An example of the success of IMCHA's efforts to build leaders in health systems is [Dr Virgil Lokossou](#) of the West Africa Health Organization, who won the best poster award under the theme "Enhancing health system resilience: Absorbing shocks and sustaining gains in every setting". The West Africa Health Organization is one of two health policy and research organizations (one based in East Africa and the other based in West Africa) that have the mandate to promote the uptake of IMCHA research findings to influence national and regional policies and practices in targeted countries.

Dr Lokossou and two other IMCHA researchers, [Dr Emmanuel Ochola](#) of St Mary's Lacor Hospital, Uganda, and [Dr Ermel Johnson](#) of the West Africa Health Organization, were selected in the cohort of "HSG Speaks". They provided live coverage of symposium activities by capturing and highlighting key messages and offering on-the-spot perspectives using blogs, interviews, film, and social media.

Blogs capture insights into health systems research

A blog series called "Resilient and Responsive Health Systems for a Changing World", written by IMCHA researchers, was published on the Huffington Post website:

- [Too many women still die during pregnancy and childbirth](#), by Loubna Belaid and Valery Ridde, University of Montreal
- [How an impatient doctor got passionate about health systems](#), by Christina Zarowsky, University of Montreal

- [Social enterprise models to improve women's livelihoods and health in Africa](#), by Jenipher Twebaze Musoke, BRAC Africa, and Kevin McKague, Cape Breton University

These blogs showcase unique IMCHA interventions that demonstrate a need for adopting a health systems lens, policy issues related to maternal and child health, and personal insights to remind us that above all, health systems are about people and improving lives.

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