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14 lessons to prepare for future health emergencies from AU Support to the Ebola Outbreak in West Africa



Malabo, 20 July 2015- Ahead of the AU summit where leaders are expected to pledge more support to the Ebola response and recovery efforts, health and foreign affairs ministers, discussed the immediate needs of the affected countries. Countries shared experiences and lessons learnt in health systems strengthening and financing in the context of the Ebola fight.

“This meeting is an important opportunity to share experiences in the fight against Ebola and to provide concrete assistance to our brothers and sisters on their irreversible path to recovery and reconstruction” said Hon. Dr. Simbarashe Mumbengegwi, the Minister of Foreign

Affairs of the Republic of Zimbabwe and Chairperson of the Executive Council of the African Union.

The African Union Support to the Ebola Outbreak in West Africa (ASEOWA) mounted an effective response that deployed 850 volunteer health workers from AU Member States. This was a game changer that helped stem the tide of the epidemic.

Key lessons from Africa helping Africa in the Ebola response

African Union's political clout

ASEOWA anchored on African Union's political leverage, continental reach and networks in the region and beyond. Technical expertise came from many Member States, regional groupings, development partners and affected countries.

Quick humanitarian emergency response

The decision to deploy was taken by the African Union Peace and Security Council within 24 hours of the African Union Permanent Representatives Council being briefed. An assessment team was on the ground within 10 days of the decision to form ASEOWA. Within less than a month, ASEOWA teams were on the ground at the peak of the crisis. Once the surge was decided in November 2014, it took less than one month to have 850 health workers in the three worst affected countries.

Effective coordination at various levels

To streamline operations ASEOWA coordinated the operation at both continental and affected countries level. It leveraged on expertise of various countries and partners and harmonised coordination between medical, logistics and other emergency response capabilities.

Private sector collaboration

The African private sector provided the single largest financial contribution to the AU's Ebola response. It also made available its assets and resource mobilisation expertise.

International solidarity

With the African Union taking a leadership position the international community provided significant financial and technical support including response infrastructure.

Competent leadership

The mission leadership was a mix of expertise in combating previous Ebola responses, leading complex operations across Africa and humanitarian emergencies.

Diverse range of specialist cadres

The ASEOWA volunteers included doctors, nurses, epidemiologists, lab scientists and technicians, public health officers, social workers, psycho-social experts, community mobilisers, public and communication for development experts and survivors.

Hot zone training

ASEOWA teams trained thousands of Health Care Workers in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone in hot zone management and community mobilisation. Its specialists supported and assisted foreign medical teams from Cuba and China.

Field positioning

Epidemiologists recruited from the African Field Epidemiology Network were deployed along the borders. ASEOWA medics managed emergency treatment units in the three countries.

Cost effectiveness and building local capacities

ASEOWA deployed 850 health workers from several African countries, and recruited more than 4,000 local volunteers, including

survivors, to work all over the affected region at a cost that was only a fraction of what other aid interventions cost.

Applying local solutions to local problems

ASEOWA teams worked with survivors, with local communities and national structures to provide solutions that worked.

Responding to local priorities

ASEOWA was flexible enough to deploy its teams to where they were needed the most, and to support the people's priorities.

Pan African solidarity

In the spirit of Africa helping Africans, various countries seconded their health workers to assist in the response.

Looking into the future

The African Union and partners are strengthening their capacities to respond to emergencies and disasters. The ASEOWA response provides a working model for emergency response in Africa. The way Africa came together to respond to the Ebola crisis strengthens its common positioning on other development planning and priorities.

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