

REPORT

International Center for Advanced Research and Training



2014 International Symposium

Role of Research to Improve Health and
Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa

21-23 August
Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo

(Report prepared by J Miller, L Peters and K Mubagwa)

Introduction

The theme of the First International Symposium organized by the International Center for Advanced Research and Training (ICART) was the “Role of research to Improve Health and Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa.” The symposium was held 21-23 August 2014 in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo. To our knowledge, it was the largest scientific conference ever to be held in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. For three days, well over 200 participants attended 11 plenary sessions and 14 ordinary sessions. The plenary sessions were given by internationally known speakers with diverse expertises, representing the various tracts of this multidisciplinary conference. The ordinary sessions represented a mix of 74 seasoned and more novice investigators chosen to present their work from the more than 100 abstracts submitted for review. Approximately 200 people participated in the symposium representing local universities, hospitals, NGOs and government programs of various disciplines, including agriculture, health, and social science. The final closing reception took place on a boat, with lunch and a tour of Lake Kivu, which provided people an opportunity to discuss future collaborations and projects.

Objectives

The overall objective of the meeting was to bring into close contact local researchers with their regional and international colleagues, in order to foster personal exchanges on scientific issues of local and global impact and to promote collaborative initiatives.

The 2014 symposium also served as the inaugural event of ICART. With this gathering of key Congolese investigators from across the globe, interdisciplinary and cross-institutional collaborations were introduced to ICART's function as a source for catalyzing important research in this region of Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. As both a research and a training center, ICART offered young researchers with an opportunity to present their research findings.

Participants represented 19 non-governmental organizations and local research centers, 12 local and international universities, 3 local private companies, the DRC Ministry of Health, various governmental health facilities, and the World Health Organization. They came from 10 countries including Belgium, Benin, Congo (Brazzaville), Gabon, Mali, Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa, USA and over 150 participants from DRC, both from Bukavu and Kinshasa.

Content and Presenters

The symposium topics were organized by tracks as follows:

- Track A: Infectious diseases: tuberculosis, malaria, HIV, etc.
- Track B: Emerging non-communicable diseases: diabetes, hypertension
- Track C: Woman & child health: sexual violence, malnutrition
- Track D: Mental health
- Track E: Food security and environmental issue on health
- Track F: Health economic challenges

Thirteen plenary speakers (each lasting 45 minutes) were scheduled. Of these, 11 were able to attend in person, 2 had unexpected visa issues and a third (JJ. Myyembe) was called away at the last minute to assist internationally with the Ebola outbreak, but he sent an excellent colleague to talk on the same topic. The final speakers were (alphabetically): Steve Ahuka, Susanne Allden, Joelle N Chabwine, Sioban D. Harlow, Katcho Karume, Joseph C. Kolars, Neil Rowe Miller, Jean Nachega, René-Xavier Perrin, Nteranya Sanginga, and Suzan Song. More detailed background on the plenary speakers is presented in their biosketches in the Symposium's program and abstracts book (see annex).

The ordinary sessions were chaired each by two co-chairs, and allowed different presentations (each for 6 min) of research results. The list of chairs is also included in the program and abstracts book. Efforts were made to implicate for each session an international expert and a local expert as co-chairs. In addition, discussants were designated to serve for summarizing the content of each session and for leading the discussion. The local co-chaires and these discussants were selected from various institutions outside Panzi and the Université Evangélique en Afrique, in order to stress the open character of ICART. The list of co-chaires and discussants particularly is representative of the many well trained Congolese and other Africans, living either on the continent or in the diaspora, who can sustain some level of research work, and who have the resources and motivation for international collaborations, mutually beneficial in shared expertise and resources. These researchers constitute a unique asset necessary to solving some problems in Africa, illustrated for instance by the current epidemics of hemorrhagic fever or the persistent high prevalence of genital fistulae or of malnutrition.

Africa is a vast continent, where in some regions it can be a big challenge to embark in viable research activities. The symposium served to gather these experts in one place for three days of extensive sharing ideas around health and food security, and provided an opportunity to show how an international research center such as ICART can serve as powerful instruments to help speed the research endeavors through offering an infrastructure for long term collaboration, to train local project leaders and researchers on the collection and use of data for evidence-based decision making for policies, programs and clinical care, to strengthen funding opportunities for the same by partnering internationally, and to assure that each research project is appropriately examined by the local Ethics Review Board.

The program and abstract book contains 74 abstracts, which involved more than 236 authors (see index list of authors in the program book).

Evaluation and Lessons for the future

An evaluation form (see appendix) was made available for all attendees at the symposium but was effectively filled only by 36 persons. The form was generated so that the next symposium can draw from the organizational structures that were successfully used this time, and from these experiences smooth the way for more efficient planning in the future. Tentative plans are for ICART to host another symposium in 2-3 years.

The following points emerge from the evaluators :

- There was a consensual satisfaction with the diverse themes chosen for keynote presentations, and with the high level of their content. There was also general satisfaction with the presentations in ordinary sessions, but a few responders mentioned that to them some data presentations were not of the required level and should have been rejected by a more rigorous reviewing process.
- Most keynote presentations were in English. The audience appreciated the fact that some English-language presenters managed to have their slides in French. The necessity for an increased knowledge of English is pointed out by many evaluators. (We agree with this point but consider that this cannot be a task of ICART).
- The need for translation was diversely appreciated. For many, translation from English to French is needed. For others, this was not needed, especially when the slide legend was in French, and took additional time.
- There is a wide agreement that the discussion time for both keynote presentations and ordinary communications was too short, not allowing enough discussion. The problem was more pronounced for the ordinary communications.
- The three most frequently cited things that the participants liked are:
 - the general organization of the meeting
 - a good selection of themes
 - the opportunity to exchange with other researchers and with potential mentors
- Among the three things that are recommended to be organized differently are:
 - the respect of the timing and of the schedule, especially avoiding a late ending
 - a better advertisement of the coming meetings: earlier and wider diffusion of the program so that more local scientists can be involved.

- Noted recommendations:
 - To include a poster session
 - To allow more time for discussion after presentations. This implies decreasing the number of oral presentations, and would be facilitated by including a poster session (see above)

Finally, we can report on anecdotal gathering of information from key people at the conference regarding their opinion on the most important subjects discussed and the take home messages from the symposium. A sampling of these include: a) the importance of potentially forming a consortium of Francophone universities so that all are better positioned to respond quickly to new funding opportunities and notices, b) brand ICART for better publicizing it's potential to leverage research collaborations in the eastern region of DRC, c) identify the rising stars in Africa-centered research and match with seasoned researchers who can mentor and being advocates for them through PhD and beyond, d) foster multidisciplinary for fresh views on long-standing problems, and e) both in the near future informally and formally in future symposiums devlote time to thinking together about which are the most vitally important issues facing Africa and not short-shrift thse are not short-shrift these issues for want of easy answers.

Summary

In summary, we feel the first ICART symposium was overall a resounding success. Success was demonstrated by: a) the large numbers of abstract submissions, b) the high level of presentations that went beyond the expectations of the vast majority, c) attendance of many Congolese including those from the diaspora with willingness to contribute to their home of origin, d) overall attendance in much larger numbers than originally anticipated, e) evidence of new collaborations around funding with proposals already being generated, and f) a general sense of enthusiasm and excitement.

Acknowledgements

Sponsors

Major sponsorship for the organization of the meeting was provided by Cooperation Suisse, by a grant from the University of Michigan, and by the Université Evangélique en Afrique (UEA ; co-founder of ICART). UEA and Panzi Foundation also provided support in kind. Other grants were from Agence Universitaire Francophone (AUF), PLOS, Pharmakina and FAST-Africa. PLOS is also featuring a blog on the meeting, to appear starting from 3 September. Logo's of the sponsor organizations were included in the program and abstracts book, and are reproduced at the end of this report.

Organizers and others

Among the people to be openly acknowledged for the realization of the symposium, we would like to mention :

- Mr Herman Mukwege, who accelerated and supervised constructions works of the hosting building
- The personnel of Panzi Foundation,
- The UEA students who served as hostesses,
- The staff of UEA, especially the logistician Magerano/ Balibuno
- The core staff of ICART (alphabetically : S Allden, A Bitenga, P Mujumbe, L Peters)
- Dr Jules Bashi, who served as coordinator of the preparation of the meeting, but at the last minute was not able to attend

Table 1:

Affiliation of first authors of abstracts, showing international character of the meeting, with authors coming from different regions of DR Congo and Africa and from outside Africa.

AFFILIATIONS OF FIRST
AUTHORS

BUKAVU

UEA - Panzi Hospital - ICART	30	
UCB - HGPR	14	
CRSN	5	
ISTM	5	
Pharmakina	2	
ISP	1	
Salama	1	58

DRC OUTSIDE BUKAVU

Kinshasa	6	6
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AFRICA OUTSIDE DRC

R Congo	3	
Mali	2	
Côte d'Ivoire	1	
Sénégal	1	7

OUTSIDE AFRICA

Beglium	2	
France	1	
USA	1	4

Uknown	2	2
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77 77

Pictures



2014 ICART Symposium: SPONSORS AND SUPPORTERS

