

AFRICAN VOICES

My 10 years of ISH activities in Africa – 2005 to 2015

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When I joined the ISH Scientific Council in 2000, I was very much surprised if not somewhat shocked by the discussion at my first Council meeting that the Society was going through some identity crisis, particularly with regard to the prefix 'International' and more specifically the apparent neglect of low and middle income countries (LMICs), which led to the foundation of the 'ISH Strategic Planning Group' in 2001. This think-tank proposed a number of recommendations to enhance the Society's contribution to antihypertensive and cardiovascular care in LMICs (Hypertension News, opus 5, 2004). Subsequently ISH founded the 'ISH LMIC Strategic Initiatives Working Group', the name of which was soon simplified to 'ISH LMIC Committee' (LMICC). At the Council meeting of 2004, and to my surprise, I was asked to chair this committee. Needless to say that the change of the emphasis from planning to practice would become the more difficult and demanding part of the whole enterprise but the sustained support of consecutive ISH presidents and council members has been of great help and encouragement throughout my 10 years of activities in LMICs. Because problems in LMICs differ from country to country or from region to region, four regional subcommittees were created, one of which concerned Africa. For practical purposes, I was mainly responsible for initiatives in Africa. An extensive 'Mission Statement' with immediately attainable goals was drafted and published in Hypertension News, opus 5, 2004. It is of note that the name of the LMICC has in the mean time been changed to 'Regional Advisory Groups' (RAGs) with subgroup 'RAG-Af' for Africa.

The major goal of the LMICC was to organise teaching seminars and workshops in LMICs.

During my decade of activities in Africa, a total of seven ISH teaching seminars have been organised. The seminars were meant for medical doctors up to the age of 50 and residing in Africa, who were involved in the management and/or research in hypertension and hypertension-related domains. As summarized in the Table, seminars have been held in Maputo (Mozambique), Douala (Cameroon), Abuja (Nigeria) and Kinshasa (D.R. Congo). I am particularly grateful to my good friends and local co-organisers A. Damasceno, D. Lemogoum, B. Onwubere and J.R. M'Buyamba-Kabangu, who were responsible for the local organisation and for identifying potential candidates for attendance as well from their own country as from neighboring countries. Furthermore, the International Forum for Hypertension Control and Prevention in Africa (IFHA) was involved in all of the seminars. During two days a mixed European/African faculty of usually eight experts in hypertension lectured on various aspects of hypertension and related topics. These subjects were presented and discussed in general and with implications for Africa. Two additional lectures were given with an eye on research, that is 'How to set up an epidemiological study?' and 'How to set up an intervention trial?'. The World Health Organisation (WHO) delegated S. Mendis for the first cycle of four seminars to present and discuss WHO recommendations for LMICs. Finally young investigators participating in the seminar presented abstracts on hypertension research in Africa, based on a call for abstracts, followed by discussion with the international faculty. The language of the seminars was alternatively English and French. The number of registered participants ranged from 28 to 77. Approximately half of them were citizens from the host country and the others were residents from a total of 18 other African



Maputo 2006.



Douala 2008.



Abuja 2009.



Kinshasa 2010.

countries. Detailed reports of several of the seminars have been published in the Journal of Hypertension (2007,25:1521;2008,26:2244;2010,28:635) or Hypertension News (2010,opus22; 2011, opus28; 2013, opus33).

It may be clear from the Table that the organisation of the seminars was not cheap. The costs in EUR or USD in the Table are an approximation of the total costs, after converting the payments in various currencies, including local currencies, to EUR or USD. The costs comprised local organisational costs, accommodation costs of participants and faculty, and travel costs of participants and African faculty. It is of note that reliable and safe travel between and within African countries was quite expensive. As written in an original ISH document with regard to activities in LMICs, it was clear from the start 'that the ability of ISH to attain their ambitious goals would require funding and that, with its limited financial means, the Society must generate new resources from outside sources to fund these initiatives which are currently considered a central element in the ISH mission.' Apart from the input of ISH in the course of the

years, approximately one third of the costs, I was happy to obtain support from WHO, the World Heart Federation, the European and Belgian Societies of Hypertension, the International Society of Nephrology, the University of Leuven, local African societies and organisations and from a number of corporate sponsors, by means of a financial contribution and/or by payment of travel costs of European speakers. I would have loved to end my term as chair of the LMICC with an eight seminar in Kinshasa in 2015 to complete the second cycle of four seminars, but regrettably the organisation had to be cancelled because of insufficient external support, highlighting the importance of support from outside sources.

Unfortunately, one should also be prepared for 'adverse events' and disappointments; a summary of some of them may be informative. To be sure that international flights and air travel within African countries would be reliable and safe, flights were arranged as much as possible by a travel agency in Leuven. It was therefore quite disappointing that tickets issued abroad were not accepted in Nigeria for Nigerian participants in the

first seminar in Mozambique, so that new tickets had to be bought locally, at double the cost... At another seminar abroad Nigerian participants had to change planes in Johannesburg, for which they had to leave the airport for an overnight stay in a nearby hotel. However, this was not allowed because they did not have the required visa for South Africa; the airport closed for the night and they had to return home the same day without attending the seminar. At one of the early seminars local expenses were unexpectedly high and in fact partly redundant. This experience prompted me to work out a set of rules and regulations for the organisation of the seminars, including a detailed and strict budget proposal. One pharmaceutical company supported the seminars by a gift of 100 excellent stethoscopes to be offered to participants. It was quite frustrating that a few of these valuable stethoscopes had to be handed over to a customs officer before being allowed to enter the country. At several seminars unregistered participants showed up; they were of course welcome to attend but caused problems for logistics, catering and costs.

I would like to finish this report with some of the other goals for LMICs as outlined in the original Mission Statement. The low number of members from LMICs was of great concern to ISH, at least partly due to the high cost of membership and mandatory subscription to the Journal of Hypertension. In 2006 an agreement was signed with the publisher to enable residents from low income HINARI countries to pay a modest membership fee and have free on-line access to the journal. Another aim was to support meetings on hypertension by other organisations and societies in LMICs and include active participation by ISH members, which happened in a number of meetings in Africa.

I hope that this report of my experiences, most of them excellent and rewarding, some of them a bit sad and disappointing, may be of help for the future organisation of ISH activities in LMICs, particularly in Africa.

Table. Details on the seven seminars organised by the ISH Low and Middle Income Countries Committee in Africa in the period 2005-2015.

Site	Date	Local organiser	Number of registered participants (from host country)	Number of lectures/ abstracts	Costs (x 1000)	Language
Maputo, Mozambique	21-22/09/2006	Damasceno A.	28 (13)	14/11	35 EUR	English
Douala, Cameroon	13-14/03/2008	Lemogoum D.	50 (30)	15/13	52 EUR	French
Abuja, Nigeria	24-25/09/2009	Onwubere B.	44 (26)	17/26	85 USD	English
Kinshasa, D.R. Congo	06-07/05/2010	M'Buyamba-Kabangu J.R.	77 (67)	17/18	90 USD	French
Maputo, Mozambique	06-07/10/2011	Damasceno A.	70 (51)	19/18	57 USD	English
Douala, Cameroon	25-26/10/2012	Lemogoum D.	33 (18)	16/13	54 EUR	French
Abuja, Nigeria	25-26/10/2013	Onwubere B.	50 (47)	16/17	74 USD	English