

Increasing capacity and retention of the global health workforce

Aumentar a capacidade e a retenção da força de trabalho global em saúde

Augmenter la capacité et la rétention du personnel de santé mondial

Luís Gomes Sambo¹ 

(1) MD, PhD, Especialista em Saúde Pública. Diretor Regional Emérito da OMS para África e ex-Presidente do Comité de Reconhecimento da Federação Mundial de Educação Médica (WFME).

Resumo

Na conferência da Association of Medical Schools in Africa (AMSA), realizada em Lagos em 2026, Luís Gomes Sambo apresentou uma reflexão abrangente sobre os desafios atuais da educação médica e do desenvolvimento dos sistemas de saúde em África. Partindo das profundas transformações epidemiológicas, demográficas e sociais que marcam o continente, Luís Sambo destaca a necessidade urgente de reforçar a capacidade, a qualidade e a retenção dos profissionais de saúde, num contexto de sistemas de saúde frágeis enfrentando escassez de recursos humanos, financeiros e tecnológicos, o que por seu turno favorece iniquidades no acesso aos cuidados de saúde. A conferência sublinha igualmente a importância de uma educação médica mais interdisciplinar, socialmente comprometida e adaptada às novas realidades tecnológicas e sanitárias, defendendo abordagens inovadoras centradas nos cuidados de saúde primários, na equidade em saúde e na integração dos determinantes sociais da saúde. Mais do que um diagnóstico dos desafios africanos, esta intervenção constitui um apelo à ação dirigido às instituições académicas, decisores políticos e profissionais de saúde, em prol de sistemas de saúde mais resilientes, inclusivos e sustentáveis no continente africano. Reproduzimos a intervenção de Luis Gomes Sambo no passado dia 26 de março de 2026, no âmbito da conferência híbrida que teve lugar em Lagos, Nigéria; em que o autor abordou o tema sobre “*A Educação Médica e o Desenvolvimento dos Sistemas de Saúde em África*” nomeadamente do ponto de vista da retenção de recursos humanos especializados.

Palavras-chave: Educação médica, sistemas de saúde em África, recursos humanos em saúde, retenção, cobertura universal.

Abstract

At the 2026 conference of the Association of Medical Schools in Africa (AMSA), held in Lagos, Luís Gomes Sambo presented a broad reflection on the current challenges facing medical education and health systems development in Africa. Drawing on the profound epidemiological, demographic, and social transformations affecting the continent, the author highlights the urgent need to strengthen the capacity, quality, and retention of health professionals in a context of fragile health systems facing scarcity of human, financial and technological resources, which favours inequities in access to health care. The lecture also emphasizes the importance of more interdisciplinary, socially engaged medical education adapted to emerging diseases patterns and technological innovations. The author advocates for primary health care approach, health equity, and the integration of the social determinants of health. More than a diagnosis of African challenges, this intervention constitutes a call to action addressed to academic institutions, policy-makers, and health professionals in favour of more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable health systems across Africa. We reproduce the conference delivered by Luís Gomes Sambo on March 26, 2026, at the Hybrid Medical Education Conference in Lagos, Nigeria. The author addressed medical education and the development of health systems in Africa, particularly from the perspective of retaining specialized human resources.

Keywords: Medical education, health systems in Africa, human resources for health, retention, universal health coverage.

Résumé

Lors de la conférence 2026 de l'Association of Medical Schools in Africa (AMSA), tenue à Lagos, Luís Gomes Sambo a présenté une réflexion approfondie sur les défis actuels de la formation médicale et du développement des systèmes de santé en Afrique. S'appuyant sur les profondes transformations épidémiologiques, démographiques et sociales que connaît le continent, l'auteur souligne la nécessité urgente de renforcer les capacités, la qualité et la rétention des professionnels de santé dans un contexte de fragilité des systèmes de santé marqué par la pénurie de ressources humaines, financiers et technologiques, qui favorise des iniquités dans l'accès aux soins de santé. La conférence met également un accent sur l'importance d'une formation médicale plus interdisciplinaire, socialement engagée et adaptée aux nouvelles réalités technologiques et sanitaires, en dé-

fendant des approches innovantes centrées sur les soins de santé primaires, l'équité en santé et l'intégration des déterminants sociaux de la santé. Plus qu'un simple diagnostic des défis africains, cette intervention constitue un appel à l'action destiné aux institutions académiques, aux décideurs politiques et aux professionnels de santé, en faveur de systèmes de santé africains plus résilients, inclusifs et durables. Nous reproduisons la conférence prononcée par Luís Gomes Sambo le 26 mars 2026, dans la "Conférence hybride sur l'éducation médicale à Lagos, Nigeria. L'auteur a abordé le thème « *L'Éducation Médicale et le Développement des Systèmes de Santé en Afrique* », notamment du point de vue de la rétention des ressources humaines spécialisées.

Mots-clés: Formation médicale, systèmes de santé en Afrique, ressources humaines en santé, rétention, couverture sanitaire universelle.

Dear Professor Emiola Olapade-Olaopa, President of the Association of Medical Schools in Africa,
Dear President of the World Federation of Medical Education,
Distinguished Representatives of Medical Schools in Africa,
Dedicated Educators,
Leaders in Health Care,
Dear Participants,

It is my great honour and privilege to address the 2026 AMSA conference on Medical Education, taking place in Lagos, Nigeria under the theme "*Increasing Capacity and Retention of the Global Health Workforce*". Whether you have travelled to Lagos or participate online, your presence today, signals a shared commitment to shape the healthcare professionals who will care for generations to come.

You are all aware of the complex epidemiological transition we are facing in Africa. I emphasise the very high burden of infectious and chronic diseases, recurrent epidemics, and its overall negative impact on child survival, maternal health and life expectancy at birth.

Communicable, maternal, perinatal and nutritional conditions are on the top of causes of death in the African Region, followed by non-communicable diseases and injuries. WHO - 2025 *World Health Statistics Report*, reveals a decline of about 40% on the trend of Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) in the African Region since the year 2000. However, the current ratio of 442 deaths per 100.000 live-births, counts for about 70% of the global maternal deaths. During the same period, child survival improved globally. However, the African Region remains with the highest Under-Five Mortality (U5M) estimated at 67 deaths per 1.000 live-births; and counting for 55% of the global deaths of children under 5 years old. The global average of Life Expectancy at birth is 71 years, while Africa stands at 64.

The epidemiological transition evolves alongside a demographic transition with youthful population that represents in one hand an important economic potential and on the other, an enormous pressure on education institutions, health services, and on employment market.

I am persuaded that two major constraints explain the poor health indicators in Africa: *First*, the weak health systems capacity and the resulting low performance both in terms of quality and access to healthcare. For example, the current Universal Health Coverage in the African Region is 44% compared with 80% in the Americas and in European Regions (*WHO and WB, 2023 – Tracking Universal Health Coverage: Global Monitoring Report*). *Secondly*, the

uneven distribution of other key determinants of health such as housing, employment, education, access to food, clean water and sanitation, which fuels multidimensional poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa, where extreme poverty affects 46% of the population (*World Bank, 2025 Poverty Report*).

The economic performance of most of African countries, classified as Low-Income Countries; together with the demographic and epidemiological transitions, unveil insights that call for more comprehensive health system reforms. These reforms must be: evidence-based; founded on clear policy analysis, drawing from other disciplines such as political sciences, economics, sociology and management; and carried out within a broad framework that includes the determinants of people's living conditions. Medical Doctors should be involved as actors, with other relevant professionals, prepared to deal with an increasingly complex public health agenda driven by interconnected and changing determinants.

We are still witnessing a trend towards a highly hospital-centric approach to healthcare services, and the commercialization of healthcare, while primary health care and health equity remain significant and intractable challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa. That's why I think that we should consider alternative lens and see the reality in a broader perspective. I mean, to recognize that in practice, in addition to microorganisms, the immune system, and genetic factors, there are other determinants that also influence the individual and collective susceptibility to illness and diseases.

Therefore, African countries need to revisit their public policies to further promote the social determinants of health. This will pave the way towards *universal healthcare coverage*, to improve people's health status, a primary condition for more productive life and contribution to Africa's resilience and development.

Concerning human resources capacity, the continent faces a deficit of over 6 million health workers and continued brain-drain of highly trained professionals. The human resources crisis in the health sector goes beyond quantitative deficits and includes issues of quality, employment opportunities, professional distribution, and retention within national health systems. This is a major constraint, that affects the performance of health systems in Africa, and will be matter of discussion during this conference. We need to reimagine how we teach, how we assess and how we motivate the coming generation of health professionals in Africa. Governments and Policymakers should: make use of available evidence on health professionals; take into account the state of the art in medicine and related technologies; assess the needs and expectations of health services and medical education institutions; allocate adequate budgets for staff costs; and make a case for more suitable infrastructure investments on medical education, including postgraduate studies and continuing professional development.

Despite the ethical and regulatory challenges, I would like to mention the importance of training on innovative digital solutions, that are already transforming our daily practices in clinical care, public health and health system management.

I advocate for an eclectic approach to medicine that promotes transdisciplinary pedagogy integrating multiple disciplines and transcending traditional academic boundaries, within a competency-based training strategy; that fosters interdisciplinary research and; optimizes the equitable and safe use of new technologies.

I congratulate AMSA Local Organizing Committee for designing a very relevant and rich program for this conference, that should not be a usual academic gathering, but a call for action. We have among the participants visionary minds including leading deans, health care specialists, educational researchers, and representatives of students and residents who are the main "raison d'être" of this event. I invite you to look at the available evidence, celebrate what is working well, challenge the wrong assumptions, share innovations, and reform what must change.

I wish you live debates and the best deliberations.

I thank you for your attention.