**Achieving Universal Health Coverage: the role of community health worker programs**

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Against the background of efforts to strengthen health systems for universal coverage and health equity many African countries have been relying on lay members of the community, often referred to as community health workers (CHWs), to deliver Primary Health Care services. Growing demand and great variability in definitions, roles, governance and funding of CHWs have prompted the need to revisit CHW programmes, and provide guidance on the implementation of successful programs at scale.

**Methods:** Drawing on the synthesized evidence from two extensive literature reviews this article determines foundational elements of functioning CHW programs, focusing in particular on the systems requirements of large-scale programs. It makes recommendations for the effective development of large-scale CHW programs based on the cumulative evidence from the region.

The key foundational elements of successful CHW programs identified are:

1. *Embeddedness, connectivity and integration* into the larger system of health care service delivery, the health workforce and community governance as opposed to stand-alone interventions.
2. *Cadre differentiation and role clarity* in order to maintain clear scopes of work and accountability as well as to minimize confusion and manage expectations of both the formal health system and community members.
3. *Sound program design based on local contextual factors and effective people management*.
4. *Ongoing monitoring, learning and adapting* based on accurate and timely local data in order to ensure optimal fit to local context since one size does not fit all.

We conclude that CHWs are an investment in health systems strengthening and community resilience with enormous potential for contributing to universal coverage and the SDGs if well-designed and managed. While the evidence base is uneven and mixed, it is exceptionally rich by now, providing enough insight and knowledge to strengthen, scale-up and sustain CHW programs throughout Africa.

**Key words:** Community health workers, health workforce, community governance, up-scaling, roles, sustainability, integration, UHC