SHORT REPORT

Bridging borders and barriers: Insights from an international reproductive health conference in post-conflict Northern Uganda

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Abstract

This short report examines the organization and impact of a reproductive health conference in post-conflict Northern Uganda, convened by the Center for International Reproductive Health Training at the University of Michigan, along with Gulu and Lira Universities. The conference aimed to foster collaboration among researchers, clinicians, policymakers, and community leaders, and to address sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) challenges exacerbated by conflict and resource limitations. Methods included stakeholder engagement, targeted capacity strengthening, inclusive programming, and logistical innovations tailored to rural settings. The conference brought together 691 participants from 20 countries, bolstered technical and organizational capacity at partner universities, enhanced networking, and elevated local voices in health research. Major findings indicated high participant satisfaction, improved local infrastructure, and new collaborative initiatives. In conclusion, the event demonstrated that context-sensitive and inclusive conferences in remote, post-conflict regions can drive scientific progress, support local recovery, and promote equity in global SRHR research. *(Afr J Reprod Health 2026; 30 [21]: 52-61).*

Keywords: Reproductive health; Conference; Post-conflict settings; Research collaboration; Capacity strengthening; Northern Uganda

Résumé

Ce bref rapport examine l'organisation et l'impact d'une conférence sur la santé reproductive organisée dans le nord de l'Ouganda, une région sortant d'un conflit, par le Centre de formation internationale en santé reproductive de l'université du Michigan en collaboration avec les universités de Gulu et de Lira. La conférence visait à favoriser la collaboration entre chercheurs, cliniciens, décideurs politiques et responsables communautaires, ainsi qu'à aborder les défis liés à la santé et aux droits sexuels et reproductifs (SDSR), exacerbés par le conflit et le manque de ressources. Les méthodes mises en œuvre comprenaient l'implication des parties prenantes, le renforcement ciblé des capacités, une programmation inclusive et des innovations logistiques adaptées aux milieux ruraux. La conférence a réuni 691 participants issus de 20 pays, a renforcé les capacités techniques et organisationnelles des universités partenaires, a favorisé la mise en réseau et a donné davantage de poids aux voix locales dans le domaine de la recherche en santé. Les principaux résultats ont mis en évidence un niveau élevé de satisfaction des participants, une amélioration des infrastructures locales et la mise en place de nouvelles initiatives de collaboration. En conclusion, cet événement a démontré que des conférences adaptées au contexte et inclusives, organisées dans des régions reculées et sortant d'un conflit, peuvent stimuler le progrès scientifique, soutenir la relance locale et promouvoir l'équité dans la recherche mondiale sur la santé et les droits sexuels et reproductifs. *(Afr J Reprod Health 2026; 30 [21]: 52-61).*

Mots-clés: Santé reproductive ; Conférence ; Contexte post-conflit ; Collaboration en matière de recherche ; Renforcement des capacités ; Nord de l'Ouganda

Introduction

Scientific conferences advance health research by providing a dynamic platform for researchers, clinicians, and experts to share their latest findings, exchange ideas, and foster collaboration.[1,2] These events feature presentations of novel studies, poster sessions, and panel discussions, allowing participants to disseminate new information quickly, typically before it is published in academic journals.[3,4] Through networking opportunities, attendees build relationships that can lead to multidisciplinary partnerships and future research projects.[5] Workshops and hands-on training sessions offered at health conferences keep professionals updated on emerging technologies, methodologies, and best practices.[6] Additionally, presenters benefit from constructive feedback and diverse perspectives, which help refine their work and promote further innovation.[7] Scientific conferences accelerate the progress of health research by facilitating knowledge exchange, promoting career development, and fostering the establishment of collaborative solutions to complex global health challenges.[8]

Unfortunately, a pressing problem exists in low-resource settings, such as Uganda, where barriers like insufficient funding, inadequate technological infrastructure, and limited internet access hinder the organization and accessibility of scientific gatherings.[8,9] The lack of opportunities to host or attend local and regional conferences can hinder the dissemination of important health research, curtail international collaboration, and impede professional growth among health researchers in these settings.[10] Ensuring equitable access to scientific conferences is crucial for accelerating progress in global health research and fostering inclusive scientific advancement.[8]

These problems are particularly pronounced in Northern Uganda, where unique geographical, historical, and social factors further complicate efforts to organize and attend scientific conferences. Northern Uganda is characterized by a predominantly rural geography, marked by expansive agricultural landscapes and dispersed communities.[11] Gulu, the largest city in Northern Uganda and a regional hub, is approximately 340 kilometers (210 miles) north of Kampala by road;[12] the journey typically takes about 6 hours by car. Historically, the region endured decades of conflict, most notably the brutal insurgency led by the Lord's Resistance Army, which resulted in widespread displacement, social disruption, and lingering trauma among the population.[13] The legacy of this conflict contributes to persistent poverty, weak healthcare infrastructure, and fragile social services in Gulu and elsewhere in Northern Uganda.[14] Health concerns are especially severe in terms of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), with high rates of teenage pregnancy, limited access to contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and maternal mortality.[15,16] Stigma, gender-based violence, and inadequate education further exacerbate these challenges, making comprehensive healthcare and rights-based interventions crucial for recovery and development.[17] Furthermore, cultural traditions and local languages require scientific initiatives to be particularly sensitive and adaptive.[18]

To address unique factors impacting regional SRHR in this post-conflict, remote region, the Center for International Reproductive Health Training at the University of Michigan (CIRHT-UM) held a conference in Gulu, Uganda. The conference brought together researchers, healthcare providers, policymakers, and community leaders to empower affected communities, foster collaboration, and enhance local capacity through professional development and knowledge exchange. Hosting a reproductive health conference in Gulu, Northern Uganda, held considerable meaning as it highlighted Gulu's needs and achievements, attracting attention and resources from the national and international health community. The event helped drive innovation and sustainable improvement in reproductive health, supporting both healing and progress for the region.

Rationale for selecting Northern Uganda

The selection of a conference site followed a competitive bidding process, open to current and former CIRHT-UM partner institutions, including Gulu and Lira Universities. Proposals were evaluated by a selection committee that considered venue capacity, technical support, logistics, and community engagement. The co-hosts, Gulu and Lira Universities, were chosen following negotiations on roles and responsibilities, paving the way for collaborative event planning with CIRHT-UM organizers and local partners. This process fostered innovative approaches and ensured a successful, relevant conference experience.

Over several years, CIRHT-UM partnered with nursing and medical schools at Lira and Gulu Universities, respectively, to strengthen

reproductive health education, enhance clinical training, and strengthen local research capacity, empowering professionals to provide high-quality, culturally sensitive reproductive health care.[19] By improving knowledge, skills, and resources on the ground, CIRHT-UM supports long-term solutions for reproductive health and rights, ultimately contributing to healthier communities and sustainable development in Uganda and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa.[19]

Gulu University is a public university located in Gulu, established in 2003. It is recognized for its focus on health sciences, agriculture, and peace studies, serving as an important center for research and education in a region recovering from conflict.[20] Meanwhile, Lira University, a sister institution to Gulu University, is relatively new, founded in 2015 in Lira City, another key urban center in Northern Uganda.[21] Lira University plays a growing role as a beacon in training professionals and supporting sustainable, healthy, community-centered projects in the area.[21]

Northern Uganda's unique landscape, defined by rural geography and the enduring impact of past conflict, presents both significant challenges and important opportunities for scientific engagement. Disrupted infrastructure, limited resources, and dispersed populations complicate logistics and research, while local languages and cultural practices necessitate contextually attuned approaches. The region is also a settlement location for almost a million refugees, primarily from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.[22] This setting presents valuable avenues for research in trauma recovery and resilience, while increasing digital connectivity enables novel approaches to outreach and data collection. Thoughtfully designed, collaborative efforts in this environment can directly inform policy and create lasting, positive change.

Hosting a reproductive health conference in Northern Uganda provided the host institutions with an opportunity to demonstrate their academic leadership and research expertise, attracting global attention and fostering international partnerships. Faculty and students benefited from exposure to leading advancements in reproductive health, which spurred the development of the conference agenda, joint research projects, and professional growth. We hope the conference also stimulated investment in infrastructure and fostered collaborations that strengthened clinical services and community outreach. By co-hosting locally, Gulu and Lira Universities reinforced their roles as pivotal regional hubs for health innovation and capacity strengthening, bridging academic research with real-world impact and empowering them to contribute actively to regional development.

Planning and implementation

Stakeholder engagement is necessary for successful conference planning and implementation, particularly in contexts such as Northern Uganda. Involving local institutions allowed organizers to address community needs and leverage regional expertise. Government participation was essential for regulatory support, logistics, and alignment with the national Ministry of Health and development priorities. International partners brought additional resources, advanced technical expertise, and opportunities for knowledge exchange. By actively engaging all these stakeholders, the conference fostered effective collaboration, maximized impact, and ensured lasting benefits for participants and the wider community.

Logistical considerations were fundamental to the success of the conference. Organizers selected a local hotel as the venue, with adequate infrastructure, including reliable electricity, internet connectivity, and audio-visual capabilities, to ensure productive sessions and participant comfort. Transportation options to and within the region were highlighted to facilitate smooth arrivals and departures. Suitable accommodation that met diverse needs enhanced the overall experience and helped attract both local and international participants. The conference planning committee included partner hosts of previous CIRHT conferences in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Kigali, Rwanda, to facilitate knowledge and experience sharing. Multiple site visits and interviews were conducted to assess the strengths and weaknesses of local infrastructure and venue capacity.

Strategies for inclusivity were central to the conference's planning and implementation. The event was free, and travel funding was provided to oral presenters, enabling broader participation from diverse backgrounds and regions. The conference was advertised online and on social media outlets. Additionally, a virtual option allowed individuals who could not travel to engage in conference activities, discussions, and networking opportunities. These approaches fostered a welcoming environment and promoted equitable access for all interested stakeholders. Furthermore,

the organizers intentionally supported the participation of interested collaborative partners from Benin, Burundi, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe to facilitate networking.

Prior to the conference, Pre-Publication Support Service (PREPSS), a non-profit, non-governmental organization that works to address disparities in global health research, provided training to current CIRHT partners from Uganda, Rwanda, and Ethiopia on conference abstract writing and preparing presentations. In April 2025, PREPSS held a virtual training event titled "Writing a Successful Conference Abstract," which provided an overview of abstract writing and offered feedback on abstracts. Seventy-eight participants attended at least part of the live webinar. Participants reported the training was informative and planned to refine their abstracts accordingly for the upcoming CIRHT conference and future conference opportunities. They also reported key takeaways, including strategies for making abstracts clear and concise, writing each section of the abstract, and improving flow between sections. A recording of the webinar was shared afterward for those who could not attend live. Once conference presenters were selected, PREPSS held an additional training event on "Creating and Presenting an Effective Oral Presentation" in August 2025. This virtual webinar was open to the 18 individuals who were accepted for oral presentations. The webinar covered content requirements, design principles, formatting, and presentation delivery best practices, and provided an opportunity for attendees to receive real-time feedback on their presentation slides. Seven individuals attended the live session, and a recording was shared with the others. Additionally, PREPSS provided poster presentation training materials, including examples and templates for poster presenters. These trainings and resources elevated critical skill levels in participants, as well as the quality of the conference.

Strengths in the conference planning included outstanding cooperation and teamwork, with both the central and local teams working collaboratively and efficiently across a wide range of responsibilities. Well-organized subcommittees facilitated effective task delegation, while clear communication within teams and with participants ensured everyone was prepared. Vendor coordination was strong, resulting in smooth setup and delivery of services. The core team's early arrival allowed for valuable dry runs and troubleshooting, and the planning teams demonstrated flexibility and problem-solving skills when last-minute issues arose.

Conference themes and pre-conference activities

With the support of partners at Gulu and Lira Universities, the third CIRHT conference was held in Gulu, Uganda, September 17–19, 2025. The title of the conference was "Improving the quality of sexual and reproductive health and rights through pre-service training, research, and evidence-based clinical care delivery in Sub-Saharan Africa." Highlights included a full-day pre-conference skills workshop on family planning and safe abortion practices, and two conference days featuring keynote speakers and four engaging panel discussions. Panel topics covered the role of research in enhancing quality SRHR services, quality improvement in SRHR across Sub-Saharan Africa, the impact of training institutions on SRHR education and service delivery, and the contribution of local leaders and stakeholders to improving maternal and child health indicators in Uganda. Other activities included a pre-conference session on CIRHT-UM partner country projects for current and potential principal investigators, featuring visits to the Gulu University SRHR clinic and clinical skills simulation lab. This session provided an opportunity for partner countries to share information, explore collaboration, brainstorm solutions to common barriers, and showcase the potential for strengthening their own programs.

Outcomes and impact

A total of 691 researchers, healthcare practitioners, and government officials from over 20 countries participated in the conference, with 508 attending in-person and 183 joining virtually via Zoom. Of the in-person attendees, most were from Uganda, though some were from other African countries and beyond Africa (see Figure 1). Eighteen abstracts were accepted for oral presentations, and conference organizers facilitated travel arrangements for all non-local presenters (n=16) to attend in-person. Figure 1

Pre-conference activities were well-received, and the information technology (IT) team provided strong technical support to both in-person and online attendees, resulting in clear audio and successful poster presentations. The panels and



Figure 1: In-person conference attendees by country

speakers represented diverse perspectives, contributing to broad insightful discussions across multiple key topics. Additionally, the conference fostered valuable networking opportunities and collaborative initiatives, bringing together participants from various backgrounds to exchange ideas, build partnerships, and spark new projects for future cooperation.

Hosting the conference in Northern Uganda had several positive effects on local capacity strengthening, social cohesion, and economic benefits. This partnership helped build a sense of unity and shared purpose between the two institutions, enhancing regional social connection. Additionally, the influx of visitors and participants boosted the local economy, with businesses such as hotels, restaurants, and transportation services benefiting from increased demand. The conference also raised the profile of both Gulu and Lira as hubs of academic and health excellence, laying the groundwork for sustained development and future investment in the region.

Local IT and media production capacity at Gulu and Lira Universities were strengthened during the conference through CIRHT's comprehensive strategy, which included strategic IT and media production planning, provision of specialized equipment, hands-on training workshops, and the deployment of a customized, open-source conference management system. These activities empowered local staff by transferring technical skills, enhancing in-house media production capabilities, facilitating high-quality live streaming, and establishing a cost-effective conference management platform. The efforts reduced future dependence on external vendors, lowered costs through targeted procurement and the use of open-source solutions, and laid the groundwork for sustainable, locally led delivery of international events at both universities.

Eighty conference attendees completed a post-conference survey designed to gather feedback on conference logistics, content quality, experience, and suggestions for future enhancements. Responses are summarized in Table 1. Most participants were very satisfied overall, expressed enthusiasm about attending future conferences, and recommended them to others. Satisfaction was high, including for the variety of topics, panel discussions, oral and poster presentations, the conference location, facilities, meals and refreshments, and the registration process. Respondents were especially favorable about the networking opportunities and the event organization. Figure 2

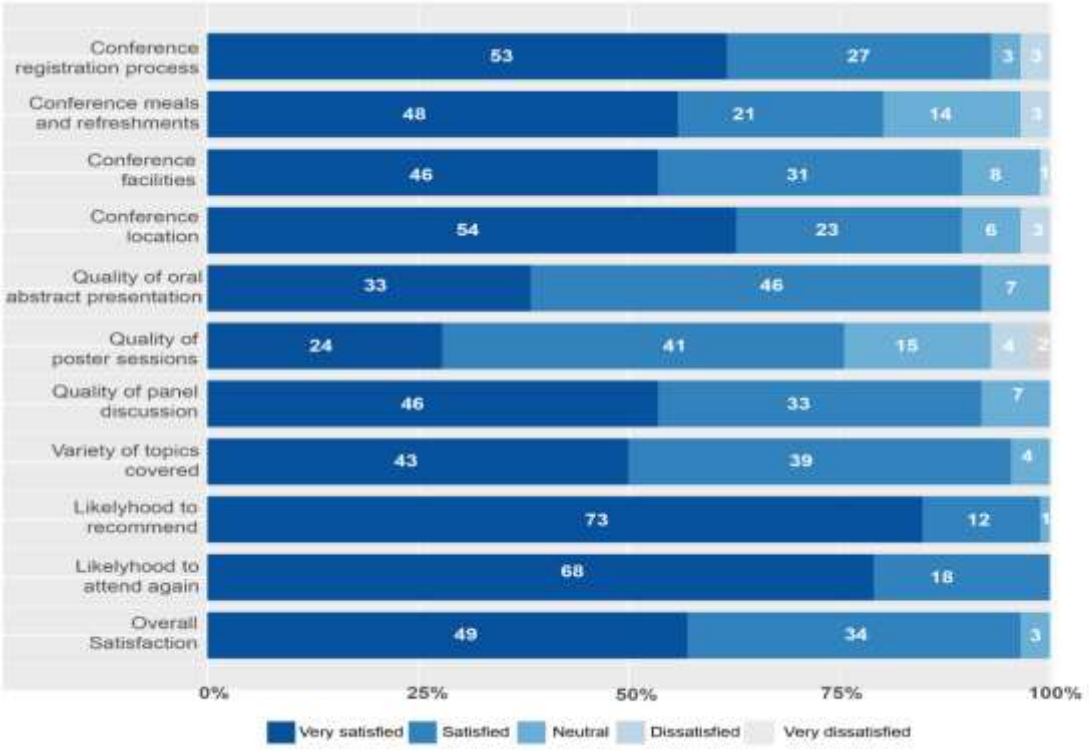


Figure 2: Summary of CIRHT-Gulu post-conference survey responses, n=80

In an open-ended question about improving future conferences, the most common suggestions centered on improved time management, enhanced language accessibility with French translation, better meals and logistics, and greater inclusivity for those with mobility concerns to reach the second floor. When asked, "Is there anything else you would like to share about your conference experience?", the general feedback was overwhelmingly positive, highlighting excellent networking, educational value, and motivation to participate in future conferences. Suggestions for improvement focused on language accessibility, financial support for travel for those living in Uganda, the provision of certificates to attendees, and better logistics for poster sessions. Attendees appreciated the cultural activities and expressed a strong interest in continuing the SRHR work that attending the conference inspired.

Challenges and lessons learned

Challenges ranged from logistical and travel issues to technology and programming. Most participants traveled from the south of the country by bus, and conference organizers did not account for luggage when estimating the amount of space needed. Future planning should better account for transportation space needs. While there were no financial obstacles, converting quotes for the venue and materials into a common currency and budgeting for transaction fees did need to be included in the planning process.

The strategies employed to overcome the obstacles included task delegation, open communication, and creative thinking. Throughout the planning process, we added additional subcommittees to tackle specific tasks. These smaller groups focused on achieving goals and could reach out to the central committee when issues or questions arose. This required open communication where all members felt comfortable sharing concerns and voicing solutions. The planning committee also established rapport with the venue's management, facilitating approaches to handling unforeseen issues during planning and at the event. Creativity was also leveraged when organizers faced sticking points.

Areas for improvement included streamlining the entertainment program into a designated time slot, improving time management to prevent overly long conference days, and holding pre-event meetings with moderators and conference

emcees to clarify expectations and ensure a smooth event. Poster presentations could have been placed in a more visible location to ensure they received appropriate attention.

Areas for organizational improvement included enhancing communication with the venue to ensure a clear understanding of capacity and availability, and better coordination of room setup and meal quality. The event faced challenges with the venue accommodating the expected number of attendees, resulting in last-minute furniture arrangements and smaller meal portions. Pre-conference activities sometimes lacked timely access to rooms and required materials, with some resources hastily sourced on the day. Transportation logistics between Entebbe, Kampala, and Gulu suffered from mixed messages, suggesting the need for dedicated contacts for local transport, airlines, and immigration. Roles and responsibilities for ushers, volunteers, and committees could have been better defined and communicated, with contingency plans for on-site printing. Lastly, future planning may benefit from flexibility and closer attention to evolving logistics, such as providing meals during long transfers.

Recommendations

Organizing successful conferences in post-conflict and remote settings, such as Northern Uganda, offers enormous benefits but also poses important challenges. It requires context-sensitive planning, inclusive practices, and sustained local engagement. By adopting these recommendations, future organizers can foster knowledge exchange, support regional development, and build enduring collaborations. Building on lessons learned in Gulu, policies and partnerships should prioritize local empowerment, logistical preparedness, and ongoing capacity strengthening, ensuring that conferences are not merely events but catalysts for sustainable health improvements and social change.

Guidance for organizing similar events in post-conflict, remote settings

Organizing conferences in post-conflict, remote areas requires collaborative planning that actively involves local institutions, government entities, and international partners to ensure the event's relevance and success. Detailed site assessments and logistical planning are essential to navigate challenges related to infrastructure and transportation. Making conferences financially accessible through scholarships and fee waivers, alongside virtual attendance options, encourages broader participation. Language and disability accessibility are also crucial. Division of planning responsibilities into subcommittees, clear communication, and contingency plans help manage the complexity, while thorough preparation and volunteer coordination ensure a welcoming and productive event.

Suggested policies to support local engagement and sustainability

To promote local engagement and sustainability, policies should focus on strengthening the technical and organizational capacity of host communities through targeted training and resource provision. Engaging and prioritizing local voices on panels and in program design fosters ownership and relevance. Policies should advocate for government support and funding, and for reducing administrative barriers, while embedding requirements for inclusivity and accessibility. Investments in local digital infrastructure and environmentally conscious event preparation can further reinforce sustainability, with local procurement benefiting the community's economy and fortifying long-term capacity.

Proposals for ongoing partnerships and follow-up activities

Sustaining momentum from such conferences relies on nurturing ongoing partnerships and regular follow-up. Digital networking platforms and mentorship programs connect participants and stimulate collaboration beyond the event. Regular webinars and workshops provide continuous professional development and knowledge sharing. Structured feedback and monitoring allow organizers to assess impact and adapt for future events. Formalizing partnerships can secure funding and shared commitment, ensuring that conferences lead to lasting research, policy innovation, and improvements in SRHR.

In addition, continuity and long-term impact can be strengthened by leveraging the experience of former principal investigators and established country teams within the partnership. Creating a structured regional community of practice where experienced teams support and mentor newer country teams can foster cross-country learning, shared problem-solving, and consistent implementation strategies. Strong

collaboration among local institutions, regional mentors, and global academic partners allows the multidirectional flow of knowledge, skills, and resources. Encouraging joint research activities, co-authored publications, and multi-country funding applications further supports sustainability and shared ownership. This collaborative approach helps build leadership within African institutions and ensures that conference outcomes translate into coordinated, long-term contributions to SRHR research, policy development, and programmatic action across the region.

Conclusion

The CIRHT-UM conference in Gulu was a landmark event for regional and global scientific advancement, serving as a dynamic platform for researchers, clinicians, and policymakers to share cutting-edge findings and collaborate across disciplines. By convening nearly 700 participants from 20 countries, the conference accelerated the exchange of knowledge and best practices in SRHR, especially in contexts with unique challenges. It spotlighted local innovations, provided global visibility. and fostered new partnerships that will enable future research, curriculum development, and clinical improvement. For Gulu and Lira Universities, hosting the event solidified their roles as regional leaders and hubs of academic excellence, deepened international collaborations, strengthened capacity, and laid the groundwork for sustainable progress in health research and education. The conference's impacts will reverberate beyond Uganda, informing global strategies to improve SRHR, promote career development, and address complex health issues through equitable collaboration. This conference demonstrated how scientific gatherings can be transformative tools for post-conflict recovery and for advancing research equity. By centering the event in Northern Uganda, a region with a legacy of conflict and ongoing health disparities, it empowered local voices, strengthened social cohesion, and brought national and international attention to critical regional challenges. Through capacity strengthening, resource investment, and policy advocacy, the conference advanced healing and resilience, highlighting how locally grounded but globally connected research efforts can drive sustainable development and societal recovery. Ultimately, the event underscored the vital importance of making scientific progress inclusive, supporting regions that have faced adversity, and harnessing research as a catalyst for health, justice, and opportunity.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts or competing interests.

Ethical considerations

This short report describes the planning, implementation, and evaluation of a scientific conference and related capacity-strengthening activities. The event did not involve collection of clinical data, patient-level information, or biological specimens. Post-conference survey data were collected voluntarily for program evaluation purposes and were analyzed and reported in aggregate. No personally identifiable information is presented. This activity was considered program evaluation rather than human subjects research; therefore, formal ethics review was not required.

Data availability

Aggregate data supporting the findings of this report are included in the manuscript. Additional

de-identified summary data may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to institutional policies. Full raw survey responses are not publicly available because open-ended comments may contain information that could indirectly identify participants.

Authors' contributions

JMB conceptualized the report and led manuscript development. PFP, AGA, EDK, MM, BA, RG, TE, YRS, and JMB contributed to conference planning, stakeholder engagement, and implementation. PFP, AGA, EDK, MM, BA, RG, TE, YRS, and JMB supported capacity-strengthening activities, technical coordination, and conference evaluation. PFP, AGA, EDK, MM, BA, EA, AM, RG, TE, YRS, and JMB summarized and interpreted post-conference survey findings. PFP, AGA, and JMB drafted the initial manuscript. All authors contributed to critical revision of the manuscript, approved the final version, and agree to be accountable for the content of the work.

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