Report of an online workshop on open publishing of public health in Africa: April 3rd, 2024

There is a need for local research in Africa to help provide an evidence base for policy development. However, the need for opportunities for researchers to publish their findings in local journals with results readily available to other researchers or policymakers impedes this aim. Greater academic credit is currently given to researchers who publish in high-impact international rather than in local journals. Meanwhile, most international journals either have high article processing charges or their contents are hidden behind paywalls.

The workshop organisers have been involved in discussions and have two recent peer-reviewed publications on open access publishing of public health research in Africa. Building on this, a workshop was designed to explore how to develop an ecosystem for the open publishing of African research in public health. The workshop witnessed the attendance of participants from several African countries, each contributing to the discussions and learning exchange.

Organising partners: WACREN; PublicHealth.Africa; LIBSENSE; AFREhealth; West African Institute of Public Health; Peoples-Praxis,

The programme comprised a series of presentations, four breakout room discussions and a closing summary session.
Note: summaries of the presentations are presented below, and the full presentations can be accessed at https://indico.wacren.net/event/200/

1. Introductions and agenda setting
Speaker: Dr Ian Ruredzo (PHA (University of Zimbabwe))

2. Open publishing in Africa: Current state and future prospects
Speaker: Omo Oaiya (WACREN)
- Africa faces challenges in producing locally relevant and globally valid research, that research output from Africa remains disproportionately low compared to the Global North, and the lack of access to scientific literature hinders effective communication of research findings.
- Open access matters for global recognition for African scientists as publishing research in African journals provides better visibility for African scientists. This is important because, in

most cases, the traditional Western journals overlook African research, considering it less of a priority or too applied.

- Reducing Barriers: Open Access models eliminate subscription fees and reduce cost-related barriers. African researchers gain equal footing in global publication and research frameworks.
- Local Impact and Accessibility: Openly accessible scholarly content benefits local communities, institutions, and researchers and ensures that research outcomes are readily available to those who need them most.
- Open Access isn't just about scholarly content—it's about empowering communities and advancing knowledge for all.
- A number of relevant initiatives, including LIBSENSE, Open Research Africa, African Journals Online (AJOL), and AAS Open Research, have been undertaken in this regard.
- EIFL, WACREN and AJOL are collaborating on a new three-year project to support no-fee open access (OA) publishing in Africa (diamond OA) and shared open publishing infrastructures.

3. Results of two research projects by PublicHealth.africa (PHA)
Speaker: Dr Dominic Agyei Dankwah (University of Health and Allied Sciences)
The results of two published research studies were presented:

- Open access publication of public health research in African journals. *Insights: the UKSG journal*, 36(1), p.6.DOI: https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.605 and Open publishing of public health research in Africa: an exploratory investigation of the barriers and solutions, *Insights: the UKSG journal*, 37(1), p. 6. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.635.
- The studies found that many African countries have no health journals or only one, most journals were not indexed in scholarly search engines, and one-half of the journals levied Article Processing Charges to be paid by the author or their institution. The subsequent survey of African teachers, researchers, editors and publishers found their experience of open access publishing limited, as was their knowledge of its advantages and disadvantages. Two-thirds of the respondents expressed a desire to join a mentoring programme and to have access to online courses relevant to their interests.

4. Experience with an online course on peer review and open publishing
Speaker: Prof. Richard Heller (Peoples-Praxis)

- PublicHealth.Africa and Peoples-Praxis have developed a series of open online courses, and the results of a pilot online course on open peer reviewing and publishing for African researchers were presented. The course included the challenges of peer review, how to review a journal article, open reviewing and publishing, AI and the review process and experience with preprints and open reviews.
- Despite encouraging feedback from students, there could have been a better commitment from a majority of participants. The course would be suitable for capacity building in this area following modifications and attention to participant selection.

5. Helping young professionals to thrive
Speaker: Dr Francis Ohanyido (West African Institute of Public Health (WAIPH))

- The Young Professionals in Public Health (YPPH) programme is designed to support the development and growth of young professionals pursuing careers in public health. The model encompasses a holistic approach that integrates various elements to empower individuals to thrive in their professional journey.

Breakout Sessions
Conveners: Dr Dominic Agyei Dankwah (University of Health and Allied Sciences), Dr Francis Ohanyido (WAIPH), Dr Modibo Sangare (MRTC/FMOS/USTTB), Omo Oaiya (WACREN)

Summaries of the recommendations of each group:

1. New publishing options
To facilitate the adoption of open publishing and reviewing options, the session recommended the following:
1. POLICY ON OPEN PUBLISHING
Universities and research institutions should formulate policies on open publishing that will clearly define the processes, funding and sustainability of open publishing.
2. CAPACITY BUILDING
It was a general observation that most researchers and other stakeholders know little about open publishing. As a result, it was recommended that training and other capacity building activities should be initiated towards:
- Librarians and research administrators to appreciate the benefits of open publishing so that they can advise their constituent communities
- IT teams to appreciate the requisite infrastructure to support open publishing
- University management on the value open publishing can bring to their institutions and the need to make adequate investments.
3. INFRASTRUCTURE
Open publishing relies heavily on infrastructure. Institutions need to form consortia and exploit organisations such as NRENs to pull resources together to provide the requisite infrastructure.

2. Supporting environment that is required
Needs for the environment to support open publishing of public health in Africa were identified as:
1. Improved culture on publishing options, including policy development by universities and regulators (such as recognition of open access papers in research assessment exercises and incentives to publish as open access). Funding for this is also essential.
2. Infrastructure development: key issues including open access, interoperability, reputability.
3. Education, including capacity building for open publishing and open reviewing for early career researchers. This should include familiarisation and support for new trends in publishing.
4. Leadership through follow-up from this workshop by an immediate working group to drive the process in collaboration with relevant organisations and individuals.

3. Capacity building required and how to develop this
The group identified four key areas of need:
1. Holistic Approaches:
In public health, fostering Open Access Publishing thrives on a multifaceted approach. This will include establishing a dynamic learning platform, a dedicated publishing entity, and a robust mentoring ecosystem, alongside intentional efforts to generate and disseminate locally relevant data to fortify communities with knowledge vital for collective well-being.
2. Advocacy and Marketing:
Advocating for Open Access Publishing demands strategic engagement with key professionals, institutions, and entities in Africa's public health landscape. Strengthening processes, platforms, and policies on the supply side is essential, complementing effective marketing to create demand.

By targeting mentees and beneficiaries and strong collaborative partnerships, we foster a robust well-financed ecosystem poised for transformative impact.
3. Collaboration:
Collaboration emerges as the new frontier for innovation in the realm of capacity building for Open Access publishing. We will amplify processes, platforms, and participation by fostering coordination and cooperation among diverse stakeholders, from professionals to institutions.
This collaborative ethos will ignite transformative momentum, driving the ecosystem towards sustainable growth and impact.

4. Infrastructure / Technology Challenges:
In Africa, weak internet access and infrastructural challenges pose significant hurdles to capacity building and mentoring initiatives for early researchers and young public health professionals. Limited connectivity obstructs access to vital resources, impedes collaboration, and restricts participation in online learning platforms. Addressing these issues requires strategic thinking and incentives to motivate researchers to actively engage.

Ensuring equitable access to opportunities for open access publishing and reviewing skills development, mentorship, and professional development will be an important goal.

Conclusions:
The group was excited by the potential for developing a platform for open access publishing and reviewing of public health research, supported by open online courses and a mentorship programme. A collaboration among those involved in the workshop and other relevant organisations would be well-placed to continue to work to make this a reality.

4. Research agenda to be pursued in the area
Issues relating to Article Processing Charges (APCs) were identified as key areas, including the role of commercial publishers, high and unaffordable APCs for African researchers, and countries' failed commitment to dedicate 1% of GDP to local research funding. The group recommended:
1. Establish publishing platforms (physical infrastructure and staff) with Open Access (OA) spaces on the continent to minimise the role of commercial publishers and cut down considerably the cost of OA publishing in Africa.
2. Train (a course, a workshop/seminar series) researchers in science communication. Public and community engagement to showcase the benefits of research for advocacy/awareness of beneficiaries and decision-makers. This may lead to countries fulfilling their 1% GBP commitment towards local research funding.
3. Promote local African journals by (i) inviting renowned international collaborators to publish in Africa, (ii) educating African researchers on the long-term benefits of publishing in local journals, and (iii) twinning between international and African journals to allow regular publishing for indexing.

Conclusions and next steps.
The workshop has identified several areas of future activity to develop opportunities for the open publishing of research in public health in Africa. It is proposed that, building on work to date, a collaboration be established to facilitate the development of platforms for the open publishing and reviewing of African public health research, supported by online capacity building and mentoring activities. Members of the collaboration would include the workshop organising partners and other interested organisations and individuals.