

# HRP Alliance in action:

## Prioritizing local knowledge sharing in Francophone Africa



Hub partners' meeting coupled with a knowledge transfer training workshop in Loumbila, February 2020

*The HRP Alliance supports research capacity strengthening by bringing together institutions conducting research in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). At the centre of the HRP Alliance are seven regional 'hubs' which empower and stimulate the research capacity of SRHR partner institutions, providing regional leadership through scholarships, training, fellowships and institutional mentorship. This story highlights the investments made in creating qualified local capacity, willing to continue exploring the knowledge gaps in SRHR, while taking on leadership roles in respective fields. It showcases the hub's ambitions to become a data center for the African region, continuously seeking partnerships to strengthen their operations.*





A scientific articles workshop of Institut de Recherche en Sciences de la Santé in Loumbila, August 2020

The regional hub based at the Institut de Recherche en Sciences de la Santé (IRSS) located in Burkina Faso, with the support of the HRP Alliance, has emerged as a true success story in research capacity strengthening for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in francophone Africa. The hub has taken a bold and inventive approach, centered on developing advanced academic programmes, fostering data science excellence and creating a strong regional network for knowledge exchange on SRHR topics. By prioritizing graduate-level training in public health and related fields, the IRSS is addressing the region's critical shortage of skilled researchers. "There was a significant absence of opportunities for young researchers who wanted to work in sexual and reproductive health," Seni Kouanda, HRP Alliance hub Principal Investigator, explained, highlighting how the HRP Alliance addressed this gap by offering training programmes to local researchers, including master's and PhD opportunities.

Collaborating with the Institut Africain de Santé Publique (IASP), the hub is working around the clock to ensure graduates are equipped with rigorous methodological, analytical and management skills.

By providing sustained funding and strategic guidance, the HRP Alliance enabled the creation of scholarships for SRHR specific master and PhD students and facilitated sponsorship seeking for important infrastructure such as a data science centre. The centre will introduce a robust infrastructure for handling complex SRHR datasets, enhancing the research capacity of local, young researchers and paving the way for strong data analysis and interpretation.

## Responding to regional challenges

The region's challenges, including limited research infrastructure, a shortage of trained professionals and political instability, required adaptive strategies. While notable progress has been made in the region regarding SRHR, for example, according to the latest [Family Planning 2023 report](#), West and Central Africa are one of the most rapidly growing regions in terms of annual modern contraceptive prevalence, the situation remains critical. Family planning needs remain unmet for more than [50% of women in the region](#), leading to unintended pregnancies and higher risks of maternal and neonatal complications.





Kouanda emphasized that the hub's initiatives were deeply rooted in addressing local issues: "We worked closely with institutions to ensure our efforts directly met their needs, whether it was training on programme evaluation or qualitative data analysis." The hub continued to support SRHR research, such as projects on antenatal care strategies and implementation of WHO safe childbirth checklist. The support to understand and investigate pressing health needs together with targeted capacity-strengthening workshops on systematic reviews, research methodology and knowledge transfer transformed the hub into a true success story.

### Key learnings and regional spillover

The hub's experience highlights the importance of building dedicated and skilled local researchers through sustained, long-term investment in education and infrastructure. The approach tailored programmes to address the specific needs of Francophone Africa, such as creating research units within less-established institutions in Chad and Niger and forming a network of nine partner institutions across eight countries to

foster peer learning and collaborative research. The hub has established a continuous collaboration with network partner institutions to create SRHR research units in the respective institutions, particularly in Burkina Faso, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire.

The impact of Burkina Faso's hub is evident in its achievements. Since the establishment of the hub, 50 students have received master's and PhD training, with alumni taking leadership roles in academia, research institutions and public health systems across the region. Tieba Millogo, one of the students supported by the HRP Alliance, reported on his experience: "I had the opportunity to coordinate a multi- country research project, closely working with other junior researchers to monitor the field implementation of the project [[the implementation of the WHO Safe Childbirth Checklist in three countries](#)]. I took a significant role in training field staff and developing and enforcing standard operating procedures in all countries." Millogo said his career was undoubtedly enhanced thanks to the support received from the HRP Alliance: "I have developed significant management



Tieba Millogo, HRP Alliance Fellow, defends his PhD thesis, May 2022



Meeting of PhD students in Ouagadougou to present the progress of their work to their thesis committees

and coordination skills through the HRP Alliance, and it helped set seeds for collaboration between researchers in the three countries. I am currently the principal investigator of a prospective cohort study in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, working collaboratively with colleagues that I had the opportunity to work with under the HRP Alliance."

The hub has produced around 50 peer-reviewed publications, contributing significantly to global SRH knowledge generation. Platforms for continuous learning and collaboration, such as WhatsApp groups, alumni networks and scientific days, have been established to ensure broad dissemination of research findings. Furthermore, evidence-based policy briefs

developed by the hub are informing national and regional health strategies. Abou Coulibaly, one of the PhD students supported by the HRP Alliance, [led the local implementation of a groundbreaking study on women's use of contraception during the postpartum period](#). "Preventing closely spaced pregnancies significantly affects maternal and child health by reducing maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality, particularly in sub-Saharan African countries like Burkina Faso," Coulibaly said. He is currently coordinating a multi-country study on family planning in West Africa. "This would probably not have been possible without the opportunity to conduct my PhD," Coulibaly said.

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