

Making our mark: Celebrating field epidemiology in action and AFENET's 20-year legacy

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Editorial

September this year marks a dual celebration for public health in Africa, with the global observance of the *World Field Epidemiology Day* on 7 September and the ongoing 20th anniversary celebrations of the *African Field Epidemiology Network (AFENET)*. The 2025 WFED theme, “*Making Our Mark: Field Epidemiology in Action*,” invites us to reflect on the transformative journey of field epidemiology and its impact across the African continent.

From humble beginnings to a robust network of professionals safeguarding communities, AFENET has been instrumental in strengthening public health systems, responding to outbreaks, and building a resilient health workforce. This editorial pays tribute to two decades of dedication, innovation, and impact—while charting the path forward for a healthier, more prepared Africa.

AFENET: A Vision Realized

Founded in 2005, AFENET emerged from a shared vision to build a continental network of Field Epidemiology (and Laboratory) Training Programs (FETPs) that would empower African countries to detect, investigate, and respond to public health threats. The current membership stands at 40 FETPs across Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone Africa (Figure 1). Over the years, AFENET has grown into a trusted partner for Ministries of Health, Ministries of Agriculture, Ministries of Environment, National Public Health Institutes, World Health Organisation, United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Africa CDC, international funders and academic institutions, fostering a collaborative ecosystem for public health advancement.

AFENET’s mark is visible in the strengthened laboratory systems, enhanced disease surveillance, and rapid outbreak responses that have become hallmarks of public health resilience in Africa. It is also evident in the growing cadre of women leaders in epidemiology, the integration of One Health approaches, and the increasing use of digital tools for real-time data collection and analysis. The 2025 WFED theme perfectly aligns with AFENET’s 20-year journey of training “disease detectives” across Africa and demonstrates field epidemiology in action.

Twenty years of action and impact

1. *Workforce Development through Field Epidemiology Training Programs (FETPs)*

AFENET has trained thousands of public health professionals across Africa, equipping them with skills in outbreak investigation, surveillance, and data analysis. It has so far 3,798 Advanced FETP graduates, 1,078 Intermediate and 14,299 Frontline. These graduates collectively are marking their mark on the continent. For example, the Nigerian FELTP has trained over 1,000 frontline epidemiologists and responded to more than 330 public health emergencies, including Ebola, COVID-19, Lassa fever, and cholera [1]. FETPs are acknowledged to be a critical component of national public health institutes in Africa [2].

2. *Rapid Response to Public Health Emergencies*

The AFENET Corps of Disease Detectives (ACoDD) was launched in 2018. This is a rapid response team that can be deployed within 48 hours to support outbreak response across the Network [3]. ACoDD has supported responses to Mpox, COVID-19, cholera, measles, and other epidemics in different countries, mentored frontline health workers and enhanced emergency preparedness [4]. To date, 4,534 ACoDD deployments have been made and contributed towards strengthening global health security. Besides ACoDD, trainee and graduate field epidemiologists in various countries have been routinely deployed to address public health emergencies. A case in point is Uganda, with AFENET-trained epidemiologists at the forefront of responding to major public health crises, from Ebola and COVID-19 to localised outbreaks [5,6].

3. *Strengthening Surveillance Systems*

FETPs in Africa, like elsewhere globally, are at the forefront of outbreak investigations and disease surveillance. These activities are some of the key outputs of FETP trainees and graduates. Notably, Guinea Bissau’s Frontline FETP confirmed the first cases of Zika in the country, demonstrating the robust surveillance and outbreak response mounted by these epidemiologists. [7]

4. *Strengthening Immunisation Systems*

AFENET has played a pivotal role in routine immunization and polio eradication efforts, especially in Nigeria. Through the National Stop Transmission of Polio (NSTOP), NFELTP has helped identify and reach zero-dose children and consistently missed settlements, improving vaccine

coverage. In its first year of implementation, N-STOP officers reached 200 unreported suspected AFP cases and vaccinated 36,773 (57.6%) 0-dose <5 years of age children [8]. NSTOP has contributed towards improved quality of polio campaigns [9].

5. *Strengthening Public Health Laboratory Systems*

Since its inception, AFENET has been keen on contributing towards laboratory strengthening. Its laboratory strengthening initiatives have primarily focused on building capacity for managing and improving laboratory services, particularly for HIV testing, in African and the Caribbean countries. Some of the FETPs train laboratory personnel alongside epidemiologists to build their technical and leadership skills; such programs are referred to as Field Epidemiology and Laboratory Training Programs as opposed to Field Epidemiology Training Programs. AFENET was at the forefront of introducing Strengthening Laboratory Management towards Accreditation (SLMTA)/ Stepwise Laboratory Quality Improvement Process Towards Accreditation (SLIPTA), championing external quality assurance, laboratory information systems, as well as equipment maintenance and calibration in Africa. An end-of-project evaluation showed that HIV laboratory networks and quality management systems were strengthened in all participating countries [10].

More recently, AFENET joined the African Laboratories Excellence Consortium (AFRO-EXCON) that was launched in July 2025 as a founder member, cementing its commitment to laboratory strengthening.

6. *Strategic Partnerships and Regional Collaboration*

AFENET collaborates with Ministries of Health, the World Health Organisation, US CDC and Africa CDC, universities, and other stakeholders to build sustainable public health programs. These collaborations are mutually beneficial and ensure that FETPs address national and regional priorities and encourage cross-regional learning. It has signed MoUs with organizations like EMPHNET to expand capacity building across Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean [11].

7. *Advocacy and knowledge sharing*

From hosting scientific conferences and scientific writing workshops to establishing the Journal of

Interventional Epidemiology and Public Health (JIEPH), AFENET provides these various platforms to facilitate the sharing of field epidemiology experiences and lessons from Africa. JIEPH is proof of AFENET's commitment to championing field epidemiology knowledge sharing. Authors do not pay any fees to publish in this journal, nor do they have to pay to read its articles, ensuring that Africa-based field epidemiology and public health stories are published for posterity and readily accessible to all. Since many of the authors are first-time authors, JIEPH has a dedicated team of editors and scientific writers to support them during the often-daunting publication journey. I invite you to read the current and past issues of JIEPH to see our field epidemiologists in action and to appreciate their numerous contributions towards strengthening local health systems and improving global health security. JIEPH is now indexed in SCOPUS, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), EBSCO, CrossRef, Index Copernicus International, African Journals Online (AJOL), among others.

Health Walk and NCD Medical Camp

On 21 September 2025, AFENET will host a health walk and free medical camp in Kampala, Uganda, as part of its 20th anniversary celebrations. The medical camp will include non-communicable diseases (NCDs) awareness activities. This event is timely and strategic since it casts light on the growing burden of NCDs and showcases AFENET in action. NCDs are the leading cause of death globally, with three-quarters of these deaths occurring in low and middle-income countries.

Looking Ahead

As AFENET enters its third decade, it should broaden its focus to also address emerging challenges such as antimicrobial resistance, climate-sensitive diseases, digital transformation, and youth engagement. It will need to devise innovative funding mechanisms to sustain its FETPs and operations during the current uncertain donor funding landscape that is characterised by shifting priorities and shrinking budgets. By investing in the next generation of epidemiologists and embracing innovation, AFENET is poised to continue making its mark.

Conclusion

The theme “*Making Our Mark: Field Epidemiology in Action*” is more than a slogan—it is a testament to the enduring legacy of AFENET and the countless professionals who have dedicated their lives to protecting Africa’s health. As we celebrate WFED 2025 and AFENET’s 20th anniversary, we honour the past, embrace the present, and envision a future where field epidemiology continues to be a cornerstone of resilient public health systems.

Competing Interest

The authors of this work declare no competing interest.

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Authors’ contributions

SNG conceptualised the work, wrote the initial draft. AM and CDU critically reviewed the draft, all authors read and approved the final version for publication

Figures

Figure 1: Field Epidemiology Training Program in Sub-Saharan Africa by tier

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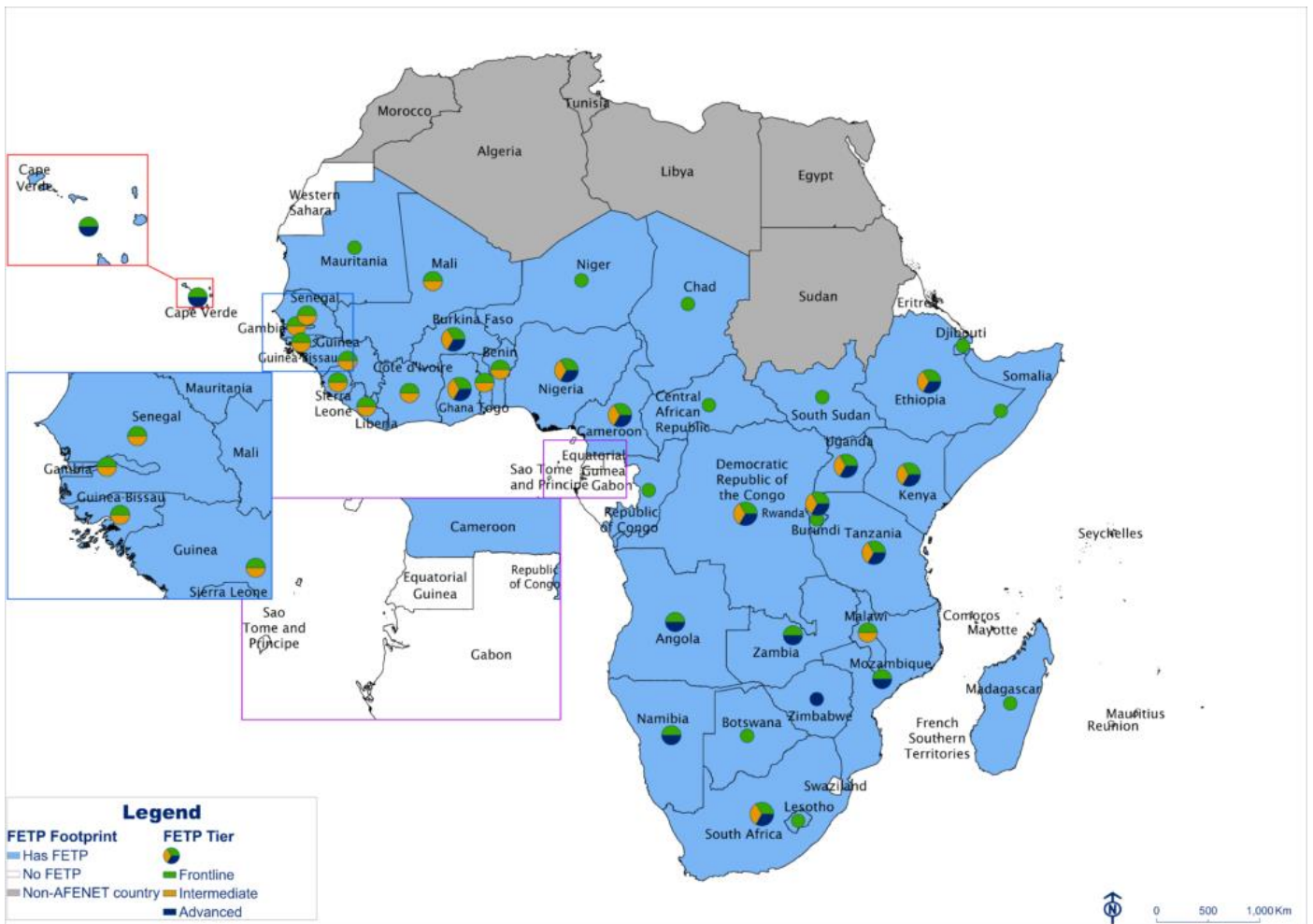


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