iAHO Integrated African Health Observatory

World Health Organization African Region

NCD Team

Analytical Fact Sheet

December 2022

Noncommunicable diseases in Africa… the invisible epidemic

Rationale

In the WHO African Region, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases, haemoglobinopathies (sickle cell disease), mental and neurological conditions represent a significant development challenge. This invisible epidemic is an under-appreciated cause of poverty and hinders the economic development of many countries. The burden is growing - the number of people, families and communities affected is increasing. So, what is the status in WHO African Region? This fact sheet will cover the mortality and morbidity due to the four major categories of NCDs as well as Sickle cell disease and oral diseases and describe the strategies the Region is addressing to NCDs.

Key messages

- In 2019, NCD killed about **2.8 million people** in the African Region (about **37% of all deaths**).
- Each year, more than **1.6 million people die from an NCD before the age of 70** (Premature deaths) in the African Region.
- NCD premature deaths represents **63% of all NCD deaths** in the Region.
- Cardiovascular diseases, cancers, diabetes mellitus and respiratory diseases account for over **70% of all NCD deaths.**
- In the African Region, over the last 10 years, **cardiovascular diseases are more deadly** than cancers, chronic respiratory diseases, and diabetes mellitus combined; with rates respectively being 294; 144; 48 and 45 deaths per 100 000 population in 2019.

1. Deaths due to the four major categories of NCDs

Figure 1. Trend in deaths due to NCDs by sex in the African Region, 2010-2019 (source: WHO)

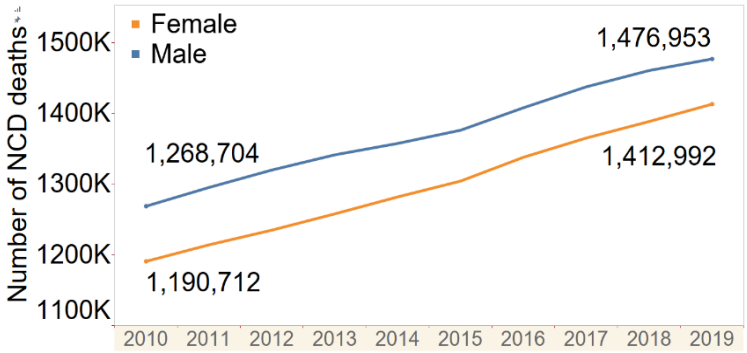
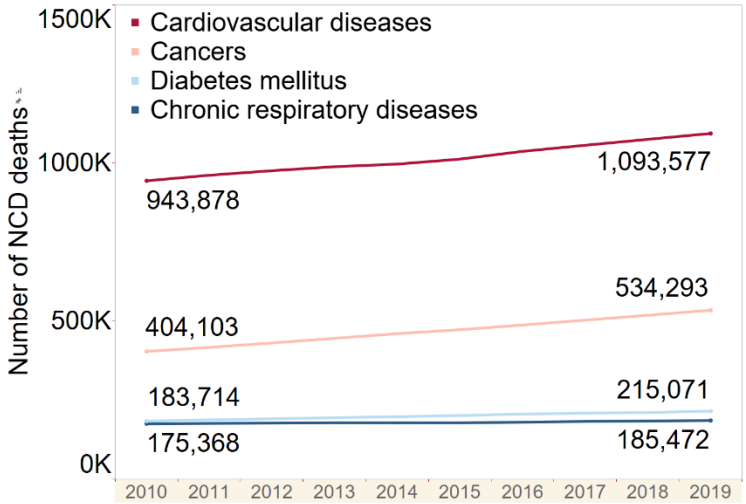


Figure 2. Trend in deaths due to the four major categories of NCDs in the African Region, 2010-2019 (source: WHO)



- The four major categories of NCDs are **cardiovascular diseases** (ischemic heart disease, stroke, hypertensive heart disease, rheumatic heart disease…), **cancers** (breast cancer, cervical cancer, prostate cancer, colorectal cancer, lung cancer…), **diabetes mellitus** and **chronic respiratory diseases** (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, pneumoconiosis, asthma…).
- Men of all ages die more from NCDs than women in the African Region (Figure 1).
- In 2019, NCDs killed about **2.8 million people** in the African Region (about 37 % of all deaths), and more than 2.4 million each year since 2010 (Figure 1). Globally, about 40 million of people died from an NCD in 2019.
- Each year, more than **1.6 million people die from an NCD before the age of 70** years (Premature) in the African Region. In 2019, NCD premature deaths as a proportion of all NCD deaths in the Region was around 63 %.
- **Cardiovascular diseases** accounted for the majority of NCD deaths, or **1.09 million people** in the African Region, in 2019, followed by cancers (0.53 million), diabetes mellitus (0.21 million), and respiratory diseases (0.18 million). These four groups of diseases account for over 70% of all NCD deaths (Figure 2).

Figure 3. Age-standardized NCD mortality rate (per 100 000 population) in the African Region, 2019 (source: WHO)

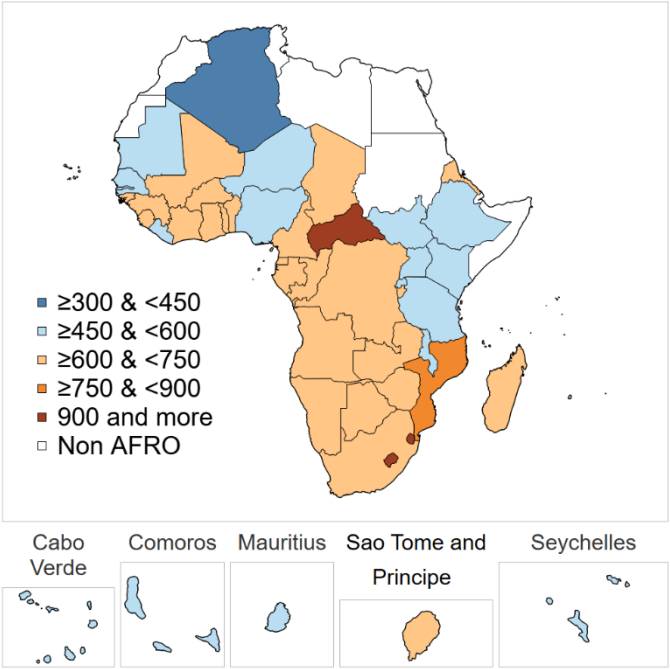


Figure 4. Cardiovascular diseases mortality rate (per 100 000 population) in the African Region, 2019 (source: IHME/Global Burden of diseases)

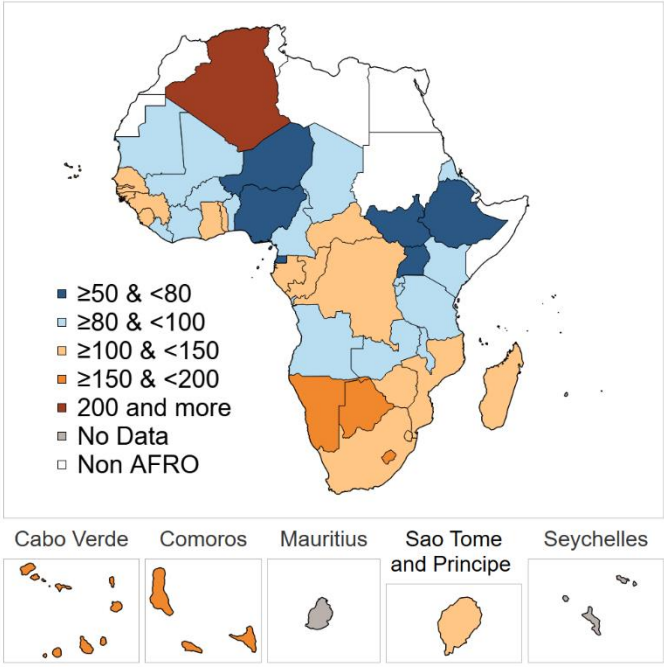
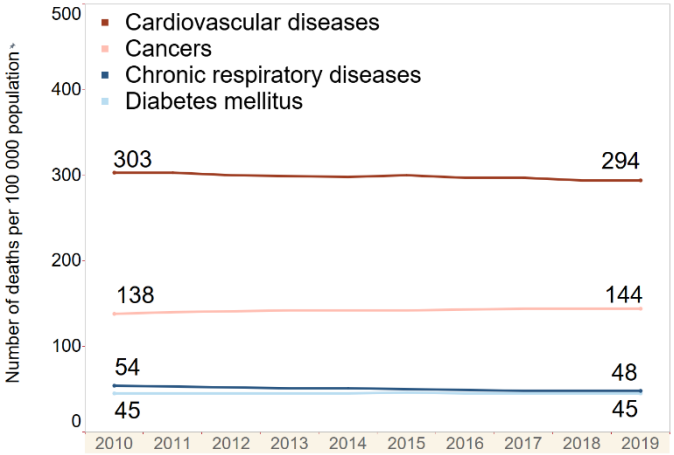


Figure 5. Trend in mortality rates (per 100 000 population) by major categories of NCDs in the African Region, 2010-2019 (source: IHME/Global Burden of diseases)



- From 2010 to 2019, the African Region had the **second highest NCD mortality rate** (per 100 000 population) in the world (death rate: **587** in 2019 while globally the NCD mortality rate was about 479).
- **Lesotho** had the highest NCD mortality rate (**death rate: 1,137**) in the Region in 2019, followed by **Eswatini** (**death rate: 917**) and **Central African Republic** (death rate: 911, Figure 3).
- In 2019, **Algeria** had the highest cardiovascular diseases mortality rate (per 100 000 population) in the Region (**death rate: 234**), followed by **Lesotho** (**death rate: 192**) and **Cabo Verde** (**death rate: 190**, Figure 4).
- In the African Region, people are **twice as likely to die** from cardiovascular diseases as from cancers, and **over 6 times as likely to die** from diabetes mellitus (Figure 5).
- In the Region, the mortality rate from cardiovascular diseases decreased slightly between 2010 and 2019, from 303 to 294 **(3% decrease)**, however cancers and chronic respiratory diseases death rates are increasing (Figure 5).

Figure 6. Age standardized mortality rate (per 100 000 population) due to cancers in the African Region, 2020 (source: Global cancer observatory)

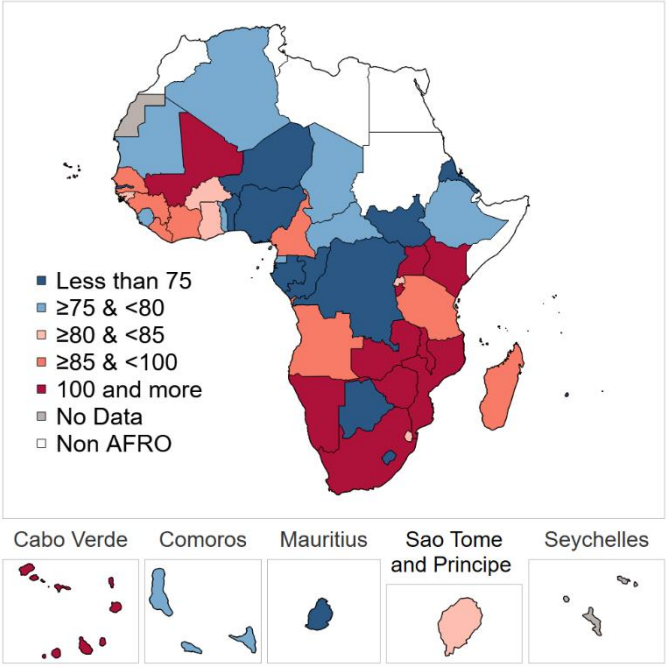


Figure 7. Chronic respiratory diseases mortality rate (per 100 000 population) in the African Region, 2019 (source: IHME/Global Burden of diseases)

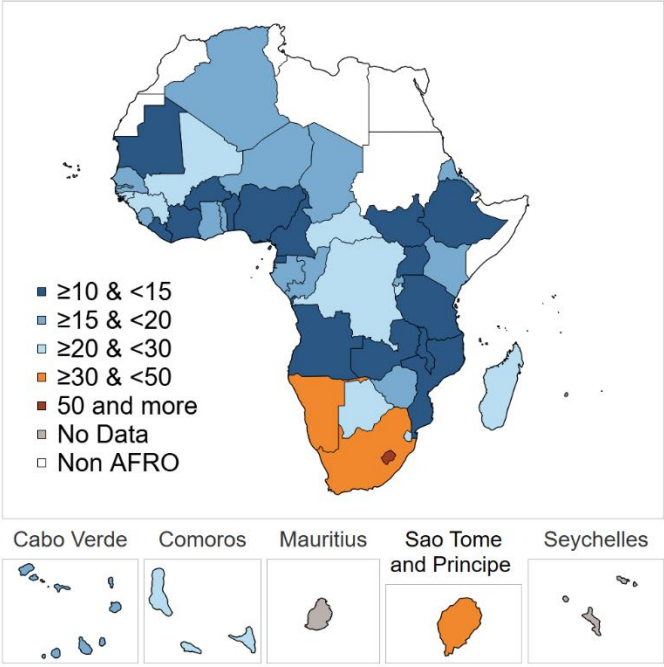
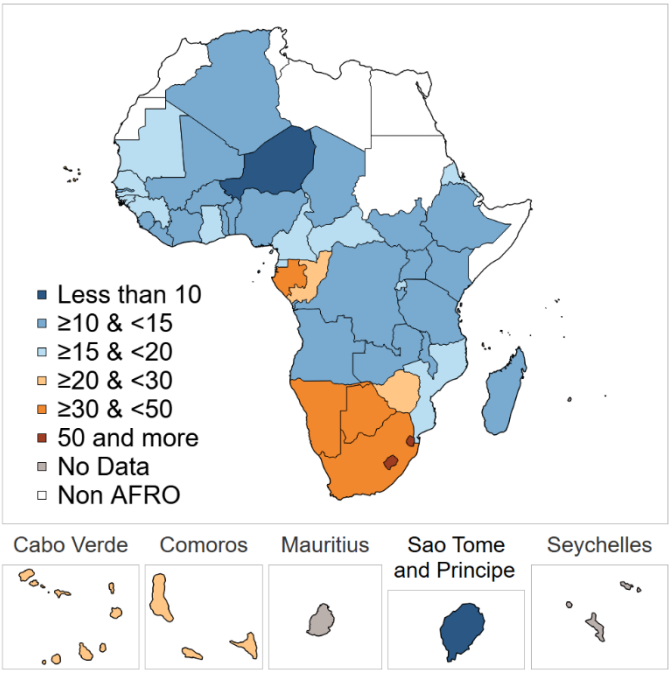


Figure 8. Diabetes mellitus mortality rate (per 100 000 population) in the African Region, 2019 (source: IHME/Global Burden of diseases)



- In 2020, in the Region, **Zimbabwe had the highest age standardized death rate due to cancers** (139.4 deaths per 100 000 population), followed by Namibia (death rate: 116.1) and Malawi (death rate: 113.4) – Figure 6.
- Regarding **chronic respiratory diseases**, the highest mortality rates per 100 000 population were recorded in **Lesotho** (53), Sao Tome and Principe (38) and South Africa (32) – Figure 7.
- **Southern African countries and Gabon** were the places with the highest death rates from **diabetes mellitus** (more than 30 deaths per 100 000 population) – Figure 8.
- Lesotho had very high mortality rates in the Region for chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes mellitus (Figure 7 and Figure 8).

2. People living with the four major categories of NCDs

Table 1. Number of people living with the four major categories of NCDs in the African Region, 2010 and 2019 (source: IHME/Global Burden of diseases)

	2010	2019
Chronic respiratory diseases	37,144,511	48,226,937
Cardiovascular diseases	31,502,389	41,863,476
Cancers	27,990,541	36,135,409
Diabetes mellitus	16,790,134	24,480,082

Table 2. Number of new people living with the four major categories of NCDs per 100 000 population in the African Region, 2010 and 2019 (source: IHME/Global Burden of diseases)

	2010	2019
Cancers	2,336	2,386
Chronic respiratory diseases	848	864
Cardiovascular diseases	335	347
Diabetes mellitus	126	142

- In 2019, there were over 48 million people living with chronic respiratory diseases in the African Region, an increase of about 30% compared to the situation in 2010 (Table 1).
- People living with cardiovascular diseases increased from about 31 million in 2010 to over 41 million in 2019 (Table 1).
- Annually, there are more than 2300 new people living with cancers per 100 000 population in the Region, far greater than the number of new people living with diabetes mellitus: more than 125 per 100 000 population (Table 2).

Figure 9. Number of new people living with cardiovascular diseases per 100 000 population in the African Region, 2019 (source: IHME/Global Burden of diseases)

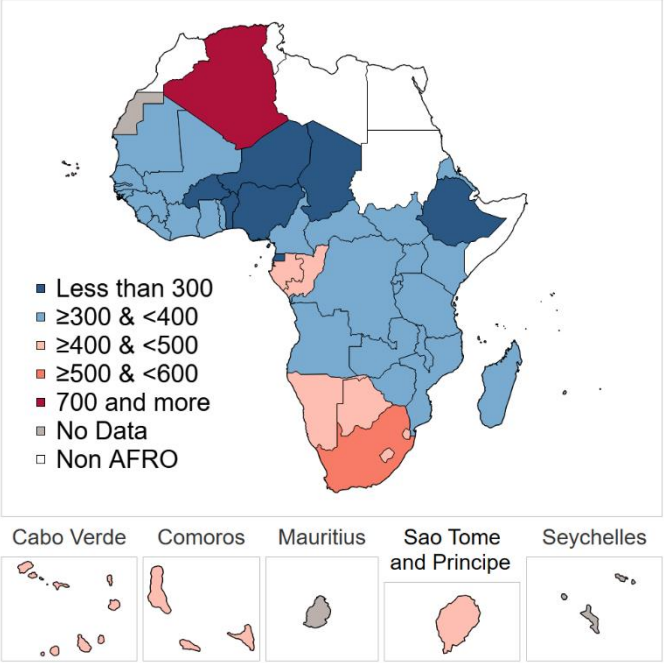
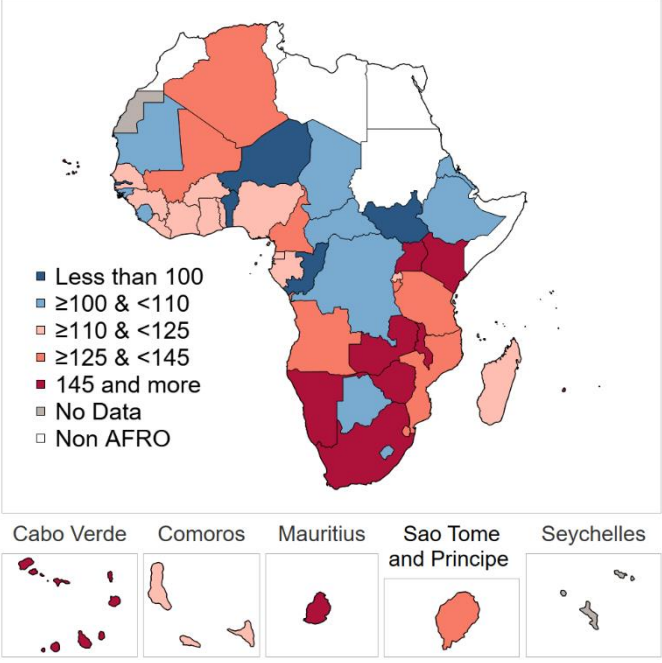
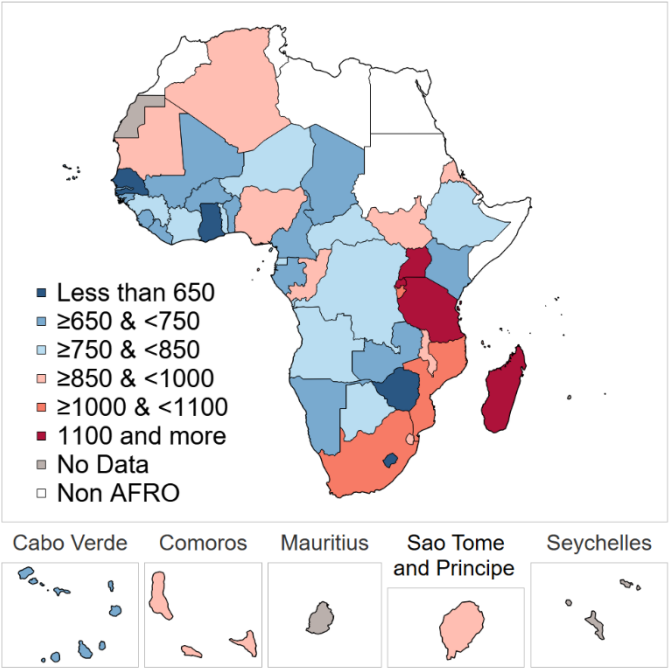


Figure 10. Estimated age standardized number of new people living with cancers per 100 000 population in the African Region, 2020 (source: Global cancer observatory)



Algeria had the highest cardiovascular diseases incidence rate (744 per 100 000 population) in the African Region, followed by South Africa (556 per 100 000 population) and Comoros (452 per 100 000 population) in 2019 (Figure 9).

Figure 11. Number of new people living with chronic respiratory diseases per 100 000 population in the African Region, 2019 (source: IHME/Global Burden of diseases)



- In the Region, cancers had the highest incidence in South Africa (incidence rate: 209.5 per 100 000 population), in Zimbabwe (200.4 per 100 000 population) and in Namibia (198.3 per 100 000 population) in 2020 (Figure 10).
- In 2019, chronic respiratory diseases had the highest incidence in Rwanda (incidence rate: 1378 per 100 000 population), followed by United Republic of Tanzania (1234 per 100 000 population) and Madagascar (1220 per 100 000 population) in the Region (Figure 11).

3. People living with Sickle cell disease and oral diseases

Table 3. Number of people living with Sickle cell disease and oral diseases in the African Region, 2010 and 2019 (source: IHME/Global Burden of diseases)

	2010	2019
Oral diseases	379,376,035	480,686,449
Sickle cell disease	3,274,375	4,030,925

Table 4. Number of new cases of other NCD causes per 100 000 population in the African Region, 2010 and 2019 (source: IHME/Global Burden of diseases)

	2010	2019
Oral diseases	61,429	61,650
Sickle cell disease	47	41

- **Oral diseases** are caries of deciduous teeth, caries of permanent teeth, severe periodontal diseases and edentulism and other oral diseases.
- About **480 million** people living with **oral diseases** were recorded in 2019 in the African Region, with an incidence rate of **61 650 new people** per 100 000 population (Table 3 and Table 4).
- The number of people living with Sickle cell disease increased from about 3.2 million in 2010 to over 4 million in 2019 in the African Region.

4. WHO African Region Strategies to address Noncommunicable diseases

- Strengthen and orient health systems to address NCDs and risk factors through people-centered health care and universal health coverage.
- Train the health workforce and strengthen the capacity of health systems, particularly at the primary care level, to address the prevention and control of NCDs.
- Explore viable health-financing mechanisms and innovative economic tools supported by evidence to scale up and deliver the most feasible and impactful interventions for NCDs and their risk factors.
- Scale-up the WHO PEN and PEN PLUS Strategies to strengthen early detection and coverage, prioritizing cost-effective, high-impact interventions for NCDs prevention and control including at primary care level.
- Develop and implement a palliative care policy, including access to opioid analgesics for pain relief, together with palliative care training for health workers to manage major NCDs (cancers, Sickle cell disease, RHD).
- Improve the availability of the affordable basic technologies and essential medicines, including generics, required to treat major NCDs, in both public and private facilities.
- Expand the use of digital technologies to increase health service access and efficacy for NCD prevention, and to reduce the costs in health care delivery at PHC level.
- Use NCD-related indicators in health systems performance and access to health care metrics for data driven action to scale up and deliver the most feasible and impactful interventions.

References

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2. WHO Noncommunicable diseases: Mortality
3. WHO Noncommunicable diseases: Overview
4. Noncommunicable Diseases Progress Monitor 2022
5. Total NCD Deaths (in thousands)
6. Cancer Fact sheet
7. Global cancer observatory
8. WHO Regional Oral Health Strategy 2016-2025
9. Progress report on the regional oral health strategy 2016-2025: addressing oral diseases as part of noncommunicable diseases

Sources

- Data are from IHME (Global Burden of Diseases Estimate), WHO (Noncommunicable diseases data) and iAHO (integrated African Health Observatory).
- **Photography:** WHO/Andrew Esiebo

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Fact Sheet Produced by: Monde Mambimongo Wangou, Berence Relisy Ouaya Bouesso, Sokona Sy, Serge Marcial Bataliack, Prebo Barango, Diallo Cheick Bady, Florence Kamayonza Baingana, Yuka Makino, Humphrey Cyprian Karamagi, Jean-marie Dangou, Elizabeth Lindiwe Makubalo.