

Building a localised approach

An important step in the localisation of operational responses has been the development of two Regional Hubs in Central and East Africa, and West Africa. Representatives from partner organisations are co-investigators for the SSHAP project. This has enabled SSHAP to develop and continue a localised, co-produced model of working through engaging Regional Hub co-investigators in all workstreams.

The Regional Hubs have connected researchers in the regions, establishing a local network in which to share experiences. Collaborations have also created and strengthened SSHAP's global knowledge platform and networks. These integrate diverse groups of researchers into the community of practice of people working to use social science analysis, to encourage effective, adaptive, contextually informed and community-engaged emergency responses. This has resulted in the establishment of local networks of researchers, engagement with national policy actors, and the production and use of SSHAP publications with a localised dimension.

“Being part of SSHAP has opened up new research opportunities... We are now invited by civil society structures to contribute to the debate on emergency solutions to the recurring crises in South Kivu.” – Godefroid Muzalia

BENEFITS OF LOCALISATION

1. Strengthened Regional and International Knowledge Exchange

One of the most significant impacts of being part of the SSHAP network has been its ability to foster collaboration across both regional and international scales. Regional hub partners highlighted the value of working with colleagues beyond their immediate geographic or linguistic contexts. Khoudia Sow, CRCF - Senegal, West Africa Regional Hub, emphasised the importance of integrating into the English-speaking academic world and participating in exchanges with Anglophone colleagues at regional and international levels. This bridging of linguistic and regional divides was seen as essential for enhancing the visibility of research outputs from Senegal.

Similarly, researchers from the Central and East Africa Regional Hub, described how SSHAP made it possible to bring together Ugandan, Congolese, and South Sudanese researchers to collaborate on shared regional issues. A blog "[How can South-South collaboration improve responses to crises? Perspectives from South Sudan, Uganda and the DRC](#)" was produced as a result of this collaborative research dynamic in the region. In this blog, Central and East Africa Regional Hub partners, Grace Akello, Gulu University - Uganda, Leben Moro, University of Juba - South Sudan and Godefroid Muzalia, GEC-SH - DRC share their perspectives on what regional collaboration looks like, from the Ebola response to bridging connections between South-South and North-South Collaborations.

Leben Moro noted the enrichment gained through knowledge exchange with both UK and African colleagues, while others shared how SSHAP enabled them to participate in global forums such as the World Anthropological Congress in India and workshops in Uganda and the UK. These interactions not only expanded networks but also elevated the quality and reach of their academic work.

2. Enriched Research Visibility and Relevance

The SSHAP platform played a key role in enhancing the visibility of social science research related to humanitarian and health crises in each region. Regional Hub partners pointed to increased publication opportunities, regional workshops, and international exposure as avenues through which

their work gained greater prominence. Sow mentioned the improved visibility of research articles and programme reports on Senegalese issues, while Muzalia shared how SSHAP's support enabled GEC-SH to conduct and disseminate studies in Burundian refugee camps.

Muzalia emphasized that "the greatest benefit is of course the regional perspective," noting that collaboration through the Central and East Africa Hub enabled researchers to co-publish work with regional significance. These opportunities allowed participants to contribute to debates on urgent regional crises, positioning their work as both timely and impactful. For example, the workshop in August 2023 in Kampala, Uganda, beyond humanitarian issues, enabled the sharing of experiences with a diversity of actors, both state and non-state to explore "How can epidemic preparedness and response be improved in the Central and East African Borderlands?".

3. Expanded Research Scope and Practical Relevance

The transformation of research scope, from a narrow academic focus to a broader engagement with real-world humanitarian issues, was quoted as a key value of being part of the SSHAP network. Before their involvement with SSHAP, institutions like GEC-SH primarily concentrated on conflict dynamics. As Muzalia shared, it was through SSHAP that the organisation established its Human Security Department and began documenting humanitarian issues, including internal displacement and health crisis management within their work. Equally, these partnerships with Regional Hubs expanded the UK-based SSHAP team's awareness, for example where Moro brought the unfolding crises in Sudan/South Sudan to the SSHAP team's attention, prompting a series of outputs on it. The engagement of partners from the Regional Hubs in meetings raised the profile of crises for the UK-based team, for example where Muzalia shared his experiences from the situation on the ground as M23 invaded Bukavu and the impact of this on the mpox response as well as on IDP camps. This prompted further work and workshops and reflects the more action-oriented and multi-dimensional approach to research that could include multiple intersecting themes, issues and sectors. Muzalia also noted that through SSHAP, GEC-SH could "move beyond academic research and think about action" with the development of a Think Tank including academic researchers and humanitarian practitioners highlighted as an important step in bridging the gap between research and practice. This Think Tank was the product of a GEC-SH-led workshop in March 2023. on the theme of humanitarian challenges and strengthening the local network of academics and practitioners to explore the central question of "How can social science research inform the actions of humanitarian actors in fragile contexts?".

4. Peer Learning and Skill Development

The collaborative nature of SSHAP's network supported a strengthened research capacity across all partners. SSHAP provided the platform for multi-disciplinary work, bringing together experts in various fields to exchange information. Regional hub partners reported strengthened methodological and analytical capabilities. Abu Conteh, SLURC - Sierra Leone, for example, developed practical skills such as rapid assessment of emergencies, evidence synthesis, and stakeholder engagement. These competencies were seen as essential for conducting responsive, policy-relevant research in dynamic settings.

Conteh also highlighted the role of SSHAP in reinforcing the quality of work through rigorous peer review and structured capacity-building initiatives. Participation in such activities not only boosted individual competence but also elevated the credibility and rigour of research produced within the SSHAP network. Researchers, such as those from CRCF, were especially appreciative of training opportunities provided through the programme (the Fellowship and the regional hub capacity building), which were described as valuable stepping stones in their academic and professional development.

5. Prioritisation and Adaptability

The prioritisation and adaptability to local contexts was highlighted as another key benefit of the SSHAP's localisation model. Conteh, for instance, appreciated how SSHAP allowed him to address themes relevant to Sierra Leone, such as the malaria vaccine rollout and the “Kush” drug epidemic, even though these topics fell slightly outside SSHAP's core focus on health emergencies. This flexibility was seen as a critical enabler of research that is contextually grounded and responsive to emerging local issues and can perhaps help avert further health emergencies, for example with regards to improved vaccine roll out.

This adaptive approach extended across the network, where participants were empowered to focus on locally salient challenges and produce SSHAP evidence briefings which explored those challenges, while still contributing to broader regional agendas. This model encouraged ownership of research agendas and ensured that outputs were both meaningful and actionable within specific local settings.

“With forming of the Regional Hub (Central and Eastern Region), we use the local evidence to question approaches, ignite dialogue and also question the power imbalance in global health responses. SSHAP has provided a platform to network, learn and interrogate health phenomenon which I previously perceived as value-free, apolitical and neutral.” – Grace Akello

6. Professional and Economic Support

SSHAP played a crucial role in supporting the professional stability of researchers operating in challenging environments. Moro shared that SSHAP not only provided opportunities for intellectual exchange but also practical support through income earned via briefs and participation in events. This was especially important during periods of institutional financial insecurity, illustrating how the network served as both as an academic and economic support.

Beyond financial support, partners spoke about the immense professional value of being part of a prestigious and dynamic community. As Ayodele Jegede, University of Ibadan - Nigeria, reflected, the programme expanded his network and improved his use of social science as a tool for creativity and intervention. The SSHAP community provided not only a platform for collaboration but also a sense of shared mission and professional recognition.

*“SSHAP has been of immense benefit to me because of the network of relationships I have been exposed to particularly in the West African region, and beyond. It increased my understanding about the complex challenges that shape the health systems and the difficulties to deal with these challenges”
- Abu Conteh*

LESSONS AND KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Putting people and local knowledge and capacity at the heart of responses has been key to SSHAP building and sustaining trust and engagement with Regional Hub partners and practitioners. SSHAP's flexible funding model has enabled a flexible response with a range of local and international expertise mobilised to help understand, frame and respond to priorities as they emerge.

ESTABLISHING AND ENGAGING LOCAL NETWORKS OF RESEARCHERS

GEC-SH established a network that brought together local associations and private research centres, many of which operate in highly fragile environments, through two SSHAP workshops in Bukavu. Some of these attending institutions initially made contact with Muzalia after viewing his details on the SSHAP website. Alongside these workshops, GEC-SH organised a working session focusing on “grassroots advocacy” where researchers learned how to write advocacy notes, which is an asset

they will be able to capitalise on in the future. These partnerships are rooted in a shared commitment to conducting in-depth analyses of local contexts, enabling a more nuanced understanding of regional dynamics.

Reflecting on the Regional Hub, Moro shared, “I have been able to develop and sustain networks in the region and wider world due to support from SSHAP.” The localised approach has also fostered exchanges with African researchers at both sub-regional and international levels, particularly with English-speaking colleagues.

ENGAGEMENT WITH POLICYMAKERS OR PRACTITIONERS

Through SSHAP, researchers across the Regional Hubs have deepened their engagement with policymakers, humanitarian workers, and health practitioners, turning social science insights into action. This collaboration has played a vital role in improving preparedness, informing health interventions, and integrating neglected issues, like trauma, into humanitarian responses.

Regional Hub partners reported strong engagement with government agencies, ministries of health, and international organisations like UNICEF. These relationships have led to the co-creation of evidence-based tools and briefs, which are actively being used in policy and practice. For instance, Muzalia attended two WHO mpox workshops in Kinshasa DRC in Dec 2024 and Brazzaville in the Republic of Congo in January 2025. Muzalia and Moro also presented at the FCDO Behaviour Change Forum in March 2025 and Muzalia and Hayley MacGregor contributed to the WHO interim guidance on Social and Behavioural Research for Community-Centred Responses to Mpox, supported by UK Aid. Conteh highlighted how his vaccine brief was developed in consultation with stakeholders and is now being used by EPI and UNICEF to support immunisation strategies. In Sierra Leone, his work on the Kush epidemic led to a nomination to a national research steering committee and further engagement with the National Public Health Agency and other institutions.

Workshops have been a key channel for impact, with Akello, Jegede and Moro leading sessions for both humanitarian and government actors. In Uganda, Akello led a regional team comprising of researchers, humanitarians and health policy makers to discuss how the East and Central African region can prepare better to tackle pandemics and epidemics. In Nigeria, Jegede facilitated Social Science in Action workshops that empowered practitioners to create mini-intervention proposals and address trauma. A [mental health briefing](#) for northern Nigeria was inspired by workshop discussions.

These efforts have enabled two-way learning between researchers and policymakers. As Moro shared “While preparing a brief, I interacted with officials from our Ministry of Health and they were very happy with the exchanges. I believe they benefited through learning new things.” Equally, fieldwork conducted through SSHAP, such as Muzalia's Mpox study in Kamituga, reflects a “humanitarian from below” approach, grounded in local engagement and responsiveness to lived experiences. Sow shared that SSHAP has helped her integrate social science into action, shaping both local and national responses across multiple countries.

East and central Africa regional hub partners reflected on how the design and prioritising of certain emergency health interventions was largely guided by global north interests. Akello shared her concerns which relate to the level of localisation possible in humanitarian responses, “I have come to understand that epidemic/pandemic preparedness and response is not value-free, apolitical activity. Rather, [...] a militarised/secured approach to attend to Global North Interests. Development Aid funds are selectively appropriated to attend to some diseases and not the others.”

PRODUCING AND UTILISING SSHAP RESOURCES IN RESEARCH AND TEACHING

SSHAP publications have been valuable across research, teaching, advocacy, and policymaking, especially in regions facing complex humanitarian and health emergencies. Social scientists and

educators across the regional hubs have used SSHAP materials to enrich course content, conduct literature reviews, and support the production of briefs and academic articles.

Akello, Moro and Jegede reported using SSHAP publications in university teaching, in natural disaster and medical anthropology courses, with publications on pandemics and cross-border movements cited as being particularly helpful.

"I use such knowledge/evidence in training medical students, in teaching critical thinking to Master of Medical Anthropology students, in engaging with local clinicians and policy makers at the Ministry of Health. The policy-makers, in most cases also feel disempowered to critique or even raise alternative discourse"- Grace Akello

In French-speaking contexts, Sow highlighted how SSHAP materials strengthened bibliographic references and brought relevant West African case studies into focus. Sow noted that "SSHAP publications, particularly articles or programme documents from Sierra Leone or Nigeria, have fed into the literature reviews we carry out as part of our research."

Regional Hub partners also used SSHAP content for applied work. Conteh shared that SSHAP materials informed both literature reviews and evidence syntheses, helping shape his understanding of public health response mechanisms. He also used them in grant applications, including a collaborative proposal with the Sabine Institute, KEMRI, and the Sierra Leone EPI to improve malaria vaccine uptake. Additionally, Muzalia reflected on how SSHAP-informed communication contributed to a webinar with Médecins Sans Frontières, addressing humanitarian challenges in fragile contexts in North and South Kivu.

Challenges and improvements

To replicate and strengthen the localisation approach in future, regional hub partners highlighted some challenges and areas for improvement, including around language difficulties, technological access, funding constraints, and the decentralisation of activities. But broader than this, the point was made that the existing power dynamics at play in the prioritisation and focus of different crises in the humanitarian sector need to be considered and addressed for a more meaningful 'localised' approach.

Where there was limited fluency in English, quick communication was reported as a constraint of some partners and reduced the ability to engage fully with global counterparts and SSHAP opportunities. Technology was another challenge, where partners reported issues with internet connectivity that caused them to miss meetings and limit engagement.

"The biggest challenge had to do with technology. I have poor access to the internet which affected my participation in some of the SSHAP meetings," - Leben Moro

Regional hub partners also called for more structured regional organisation. Jegede proposed creating regional "spokes" within countries like Nigeria to better coordinate local activity. Others noted the lack of personnel or financial resources to sustain national networks, organise regular roundtables, or respond to rising demand from local NGOs. Muzalia shared that growing interest in SSHAP has led to more partnership requests, but without the financial means to support field research or humanitarian aid, these opportunities often cannot be pursued.

Despite these challenges, participants emphasized the flexibility of SSHAP leadership and the value of in-person engagement. Calls for more face-to-face meetings, the revitalisation of regional think tanks, and advocacy-focused training workshops point to a shared interest in expanding SSHAP's model and reach in future phases.