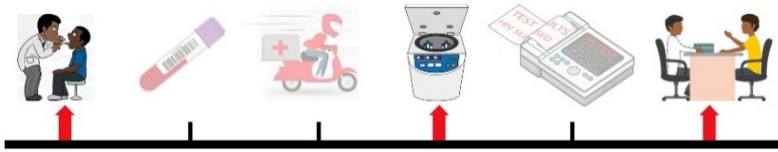


LabCoP QUARTERLY

African Society for Laboratory Medicine

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Viral load cascade topics in this Issue of LabCoP Quarterly

The Impact of the Laboratory Systems Strengthening Community of Practice

The African Society for Laboratory Medicine (ASLM) with support from the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#) (BMGF), [ICAP at Columbia University](#), [Project ECHO at the University of New Mexico](#), and key partners and ministries of health established the Laboratory System Strengthening Community of Practice (LabCoP) in October 2017. LabCoP is a learning network, designed to connect multidisciplinary teams from member countries and facilitate the exchange of laboratory experiences and best practices related to scale-up of viral load (VL) programs. The 11 participating countries include: Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

LabCoP mainly uses virtual communication platforms, including ECHO sessions, WhatsApp and Slack to promote South-to-South exchange of best practices and experiences related to scale-up of viral load VL among member countries. To date, 22 ECHO sessions have been conducted, each attended by nearly 100 participants. ECHO sessions focus on key topics, aimed at strengthening laboratory system domains like demand creation, results utilization, waste management, laboratory network optimization, and point-of-care testing, among others. The WhatsApp group (> 250 members) and Slack board (> 100 members) have provided a social platform to exchange knowledge and experiences. The [LabCoP web page](#) is used to share additional knowledge products generated by the project, enabling access by the wider community. The LabCoP web page content includes links to past ECHO sessions, the Cookbook of best practices, and issues of the *LabCoP Quarterly* newsletter.

The virtual communication platforms are complemented by country visits to provide country-specific technical assistance and face-to-face knowledge exchange meetings. To complement country efforts in implementing action plans, the LabCoP management team has conducted at least eight country visits to assess the status of implementation of action plans and engage in-country stakeholders in discussing ways to strengthen their laboratory systems. The South-to-South collaboration initiated by LabCoP has cascaded into several country-to-country learning visits, such as Uganda's information technology team visiting Kenya to learn more about implementing their laboratory information management system.

Three face-to-face meetings have been held, each attended by over 100 participants. Prior to these meetings, country teams conduct a self-assessment of their VL testing cascade to determine their progress using the VL scorecard developed by the LabCoP project management team. During the face-to-face meetings, country teams are guided on developing action plans that address gaps identified during their self-assessment. Upon intensive follow up from LabCoP and partners, action plans are successfully incorporated into each country's PEPFAR country operational plan. Moving forward, LabCoP will employ newer approaches to improve programming, while continuing to support VL scale up, including expanding to more countries and disease areas.



ASLM
AFRICAN SOCIETY FOR LABORATORY MEDICINE

Lab CoP

The Laboratory Systems Strengthening Community of Practice (LabCoP)

LabCoP Achievements

- 11 multidisciplinary country teams
- 22 monthly virtual ECHO sessions archived on www.aslm.org/labcop
- 100+ participants join monthly ECHO sessions
- 8 country visits for technical support
- 1 viral load testing cascade self-assessment tool developed
- 2 assessments completed per country
- 245 members on Slack and WhatsApp made 10 000+ exchanges
- 400 participants engaged in three regional in-person workshops
- 3 best practice recipes in the LabCoP Cookbook
- 4 issues of the LabCoP newsletter

Partners

ICAP Empowering Health
Columbia University
Mailman School of Public Health

UNM HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER

ECHO

LabCoP is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

'Strengthening laboratory systems in Africa'

Advancing Aspects of the VL Testing Cascade Through the Adoption of Resources and Tools via LabCoP

LabCoP continues to provide a platform that countries can use to advance various aspects of the VL testing cascade, through shared experiences and the adoption of various resources and tools. Several tools developed include the [VL testing cascade self-assessment scorecard](#), the [strategic decision-making matrix](#), and [LabCoP Cookbooks](#).

The VL testing cascade self-assessment scorecard is a standard tool that countries can use to assess their national VL testing scale-up program. Designed as a scorecard with color-coded results, it highlights areas of weaknesses, or areas of priority in laboratory systems by assessing six domains, namely: demand creation, specimen collection and processing, sample transport, laboratory testing, results utilization, and leadership and management. A seventh section of the scorecard allows countries to quantify the national VL testing cascade, and determine gaps or define new targets.

As one attempt to address poor access to practical resources to scale-up VL testing, the strategic decision-making matrix was developed to help countries select relevant interventions and address various challenges affecting demand creation, results utilization, and related issues, using a system approach. Following self-assessments, countries can review their process and efforts, which offers options and priority action items for improvement to scale up VL testing services per each of the VL cascade domains.

LabCoP Cookbook recipes are formulated to help country teams find easier ways to implement guidelines and best practices. They contain all the practical information that is collected through [LabCoP ECHO sessions](#), [WhatsApp group](#) discussions, and tips from the grey or peer-reviewed literature. Recipes are thus a collection of experience and wisdom from over 100 experts, users and stakeholders. In practical terms, each recipe allows countries to implement best practices in real life.



LabCoP also continues to be a key multiplier for tools uptake and calls upon all implementing partners and stakeholders to utilize the platforms that LabCoP provides. Typical examples include the dissemination of CDC's [LARC](#) and [waste management](#) tools, and ITPC's [demand creation toolkit](#) and modules that support the [implementation of POC testing](#).



Finally, where there is a need for further on-the-ground learning of shared best practices, LabCoP continues to provide that platform to organize South-to-South learning visits among or between member countries.

The image is a vertical banner for ASLM LabCoP. At the top, it features the ASLM logo (African Society for Laboratory Medicine) and the LabCoP logo. The main title is 'The Laboratory Systems Strengthening Community of Practice (LabCoP)'. Below this, it says 'LabCoP Delivers' and lists three items: 'Cookbook of Best Practices', 'ECHO Session Library', and 'LabCoP Newsletter'. Underneath, it mentions 'WhatsApp and Slack Platforms' and lists three bullet points: 'Country visits', 'Deployment of partners' tools and resources', and 'Viral Load Cascade Self-Assessment Tool'. At the bottom, it includes the website 'www.asim.org/labcop' and a 'Theory of Action' diagram. The diagram shows a flow from 'ASLM' and 'LabCoP' through 'Country visits', 'Deployment of partners' tools and resources', and 'Viral Load Cascade Self-Assessment Tool' to 'Strengthening laboratory systems in Africa'. The banner has a red and yellow color scheme.

'LabCoP continues to provide a platform that countries can use to advance various aspects of the VL testing cascade, through shared experiences and the adoption of various resources and tools.'

LabCoP Contributes to the Africa HIV Viral Load Movement

The [Africa HIV Viral Load Movement](#) is an initiative led by the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), which aims to support all Africa Union Member States in their effort to rapidly scale up access to HIV VL testing. Creating demand for VL testing and correct utilization of results in communities is an important pillar of VL scale up. This requires education, sensitization, and raising awareness of VL testing among people living with HIV and their larger communities. In an effort to address this deficit, and in support of the HIV Viral Load Movement for Africa, LabCoP launched a VL awareness campaign competition among the 11 LabCoP member countries.

The multidisciplinary country teams were invited to formulate a social media hashtag accompanied by a supporting message for their online community. The hashtags and messages were judged, and narrowed down to one message that ASLM, Africa CDC and International Treatment Preparedness Coalition (ITPC) could endorse for all country teams and partners to disseminate in 2020. During the LabCoP face-to-face meeting held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in October 2019, a panel of experts drawn from ASLM and ITPC awarded the prize for the best hashtag and message to the Malawi team, with outstanding contributions by the Zambian team.



ASLM's Communications Manager, David Lewin, explains the hashtag competition judging criteria to the LabCoP country teams.

'Through LabCoP, ASLM is committed to supporting the 11 country teams to develop strategies for the distribution, expansion and roll-out of the demand creation campaign in their respective national context.'

The winning hashtag is '#NeedToKnowMyViralLoad' and the supporting message is 'I need to know my viral load (VL) for my health, the health of my partner(s), and my unborn/breastfeeding baby. A VL test helps determine if I need to change my ARVs. Visit your clinic and demand a VL test today!'. Through LabCoP, ASLM is committed to supporting the 11 country teams to develop

strategies for the distribution, expansion and roll-out of the campaign in their respective national context. In addition, ASLM, ITPC and Africa CDC, will use the campaign for their own advocacy efforts. The plans are being finalized and ASLM will provide some funding where requested by countries to roll out the campaign and in collaboration with ITPC and Africa CDC.



Malawi's Brown Chiwandira (right) and Zambia's Aaron Shibemba (left) receive the winning hashtag and message from ASLM CEO, Nqobile Ndlovu.

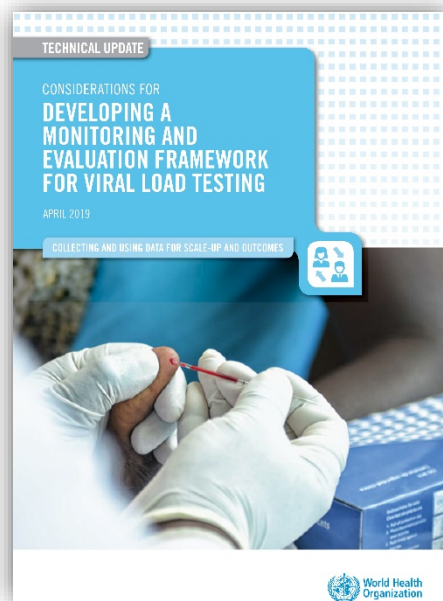
Monitoring and Evaluation Needs to Advance the Third 90

As countries scale up VL testing and track viral suppression, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plans are needed to measure the success of HIV program implementation and patient clinical outcomes. The M&E plans require clarity on data flow, data management and indicators for monitoring VL testing. To reach the third 90, country programs must delve into their data to understand how they represent the quality of VL testing services. ASLM and partners have developed this [Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Viral Load Scale-Up and Implementation resource](#) to guide the development of an M&E framework for VL testing.

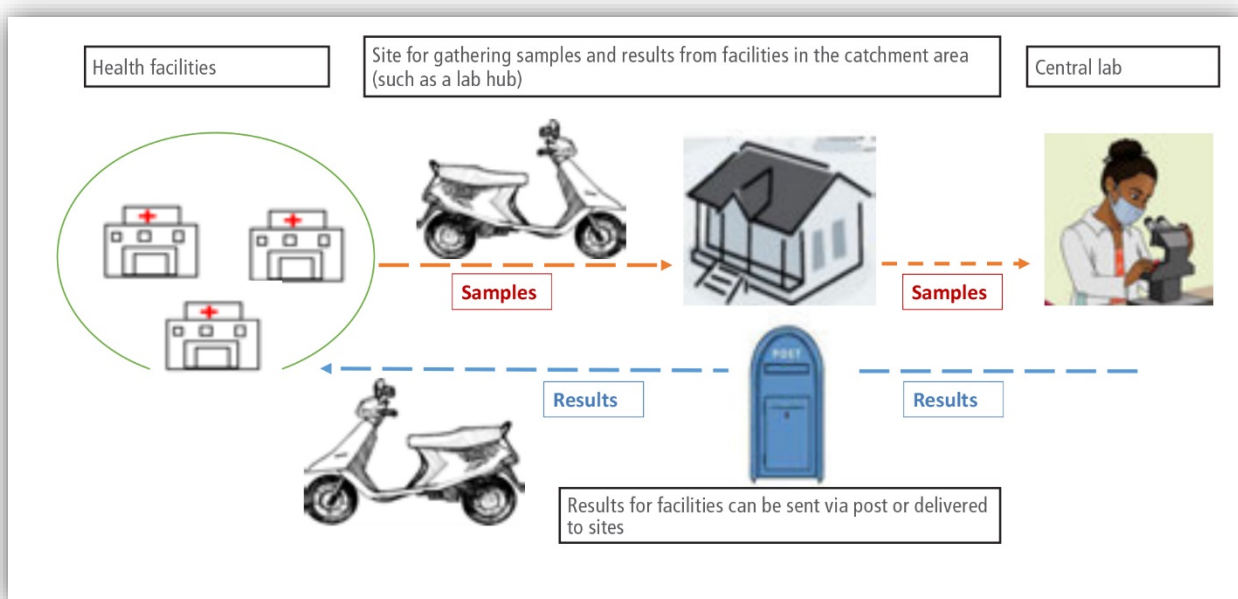
To measure progress towards achieving the third 90, indicators related to processes, patient outcomes and quality are required. Two key VL testing cascades should guide the assessment of M&E systems and tools for VL scale-up:

- Coverage and outcomes of routine VL testing: tracks number of people receiving antiretroviral therapy (ART) who received a VL test, had documented results and suppressed VL.
- Follow-up of people with unsuppressed VL: tracks the number of people with VL results of ≥ 1000 copies/mL, who received enhanced adherence counselling and follow-up VL tests, how many were suppressed on follow-up testing, and ART switch for those with unsuppressed VL.

In conclusion, countries need to assess their M&E systems for VL testing and clinical outcomes (e.g., identify a list of indicators used at national and facility levels and the tools used to capture data). Following the assessment, countries need to develop M&E frameworks considering the list of indicators and adapted/developed data capturing forms. A team should be established to develop the M&E framework and engage key stakeholders in the review and adoption of the plan in line with the national health management information system. The M&E framework can then be implemented, starting with a few facilities/districts, while monitoring and evaluating the progress and scale up to the rest of the country.



The cover of WHO's Guide to developing an M&E Framework.



Example from the M&E Guide of a map of a sample transport network and the return of results for viral load testing.

EXPERT EXPERIENCE

Recently, ASLM sat down with Dr Yenew Kebede Tebeje, Head of Division of Laboratory Systems at the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention ([Africa CDC](#)), to discuss AIDS Watch Africa and LabCoP's potential impact.



ASLM: What is the role of Africa CDC in the global HIV agenda?

Yenew: Africa CDC, in line with the African Union (AU) Heads of State and Governments commitment in establishing AIDS Watch Africa (AWA) and endorsement of AWA's strategic framework to end HIV and TB epidemic and eliminate malaria, will have greater role for the global HIV agenda. Africa CDC will provide political and technical leadership and engage AU Member States to increase their efforts to achieve the fast-track targets of the HIV epidemic control. Africa CDC will also support high level advocacy to solicit political commitment from Member States.

ASLM: What is the Africa Viral Load Movement and why is it so important?

Yenew: The Africa Viral Load Movement, launched during the Africa Collaborative to Advance Diagnostics (AFCAD) consultative meeting, is a call to combine political commitment, policy framework and strong partnerships to create momentum to achieve the fast track targets of HIV epidemic control. It is important because access to routine viral load (VL) test for HIV treatment monitoring is still poor in many Member States. Viral suppression is the ultimate goal of HIV treatment and it is a powerful strategy for HIV prevention. The Africa HIV Viral Load Movement is therefore aimed at creating momentum for the current scale-up of VL testing, so that access to VL testing is realized for all population groups receiving antiretroviral therapy.

ASLM: What role can LabCoP play in advancing the agenda of the Africa Viral Load Movement?



Dr Tebeje addresses the LabCoP community at the 2019 Face-to-Face meeting in Ethiopia.

Yenew: LabCoP is a very important platform to communicate and share best practices for VL scale-up programmes among AU Member States. Key bottlenecks for optimal VL scale-up can be identified and discussed during LabCoP ECHO sessions and recommendations implemented by member countries to change the situation in their communities.

ASLM: LabCoP country teams prioritized demand creation and results utilization in their PEPFAR COP19 plan. Are there any mechanisms at Africa CDC, which could support countries to implement those interventions?

Yenew: [Africa CDC has a Special Technical Committee \(STC\)](#) composed of Ministers of Health of Member States. Demand creation and result utilization gaps can be presented to this committee for further action in each of the Member States.

ASLM: During the recent LabCoP face-to-face meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, country teams began working on a demand creation campaign to create awareness about routine VL testing in communities. How do you think this campaign could be useful to the Africa Viral Load Movement?

Yenew: One important challenge for the VL scale-up programme is underutilization of the services available, due to low awareness within communities. The Africa Viral Load Movement has captured demand creation as one important strategy or pillar for an optimal VL scale-up program. Therefore, the LabCoP face-to-face meeting, by picking demand creation as a theme, is really advancing the Africa Viral Load Movement.)

ASLM: Why do you value LabCoP, and what do you look forward to in LabCoP's next stage of growth?

Yenew: LabCoP is a great platform to share experiences and best practices among member countries and further share with AU Member States in forums that Africa CDC is organizing. It is an excellent strategy to identify key challenges in the VL testing program and allow member countries to come together and learn from each other. LabCoP's next step should be to put more emphasis on measurable changes and make sure that action plans developed by country teams are closely followed up to ensure full implementation. This includes creating a dashboard constituting key indicators in line with areas of discussion in LabCoP meetings and measure the progress of the member countries in addressing those key challenges.

'The Africa HIV Viral Load Movement is aimed at creating momentum for the current scale-up of VL testing, so that access to VL testing is realized for all population groups receiving antiretroviral therapy.'

WHAT'S NEW AT LabCoP



Demand Creation Campaign Strategies

Keep working with your teams to create your strategy for the demand creation campaign. The LabCoP team is also working to provide you with a sample strategy that may help release your creative juices, but in the meantime continue working as a team to determine where to promote the message, how to get it out there, and what costs may be incurred. Remember, ASLM is willing to cover up to \$3,000 USD of expenses. More financial support may be requested with additional justifications.

Demand Creation Cookbook Recipe

At the end of 2019 the LabCoP team released the 3rd recipe of the LabCoP Cookbook: Demand Creation. This recipe includes considerations and best practices that can help your team create the awareness and community demand for routine viral load testing that's necessary to begin providing life-saving care for people living with HIV. View the Demand Creation, Test Result Utilisation and Sample Transport System recipes [here](#).

LabCoP Resources

See the latest LabCoP resources, including ECHO session presentations, waste management and public-private partnership training material and videos [here](#).

LabCoP's New Webpage

Checkout LabCoP's new web page at <https://aslm.org/what-we-do/labcop/>



LOOKING AHEAD

INTEREST 2020 is coming to Windhoek, Namibia in May of 2020. This conference brings together scientists involved in HIV treatment, pathogenesis, and prevention research in Africa to share pivotal findings, promote collaboration, and transfer experiences across several fields and many continents, and showcases cutting-edge knowledge in the diagnosis and treatment of HIV and the prevention of the HIV-1 infection. Visit the [Interest website](#) for more information.

The January ECHO session will be held on 23 January and will focus on guidance for PEPFAR COP planning, presented by George Alemnji, Senior Technical Advisor for PEPFAR Laboratory Services within the Office of the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator and Health Diplomacy (OGAC), Washington, DC.

Lab Culture Issue 23, scheduled for release in February of 2020, will focus on 'External Quality Assurance to Improve Testing for Infectious Diseases in Africa'.



<https://aslm.org/what-we-do/labcop/>