

São Tomé and Principle Conduct Self-assessment of HIV Viral Load Cascade and Readiness for Integration of Diagnostic Testing

From 23-25 January 2024, the São Tomé and Principle LabCoP country team conducted a self-assessment of the country’s HIV viral load (VL) testing cascade and integration readiness of their laboratory systems. The workshop was held at the São Tomé Pestana Hotel with participants from the main laboratory departments of the Ministry of Health and partners, and a team of experts from ASLM’s LabCoP Management team. The workshop aimed to identify gaps and develop interventions to address them.

objectives of HIV VL assessment and integrated diagnostics testing. The country team was engaged through active discussions with some guidelines in place to support the selection of more appropriate answers to the self-assessment tools.



The São Tomé LabCoP country team, LabCoP Mgt team and Ministry of Health partners

During the workshop, the LabCoP Management team presented the purposes of the LabCoP project, and addressed the



Dr Sequeira presents the self-assessment tool for open discussion with colleagues

The ASLM team visited the National TB/HIV Reference Laboratory to learn about their diagnostics testing and work processes, and the Department of Laboratories at the Ministry of Health, where they were welcomed by the General Director of Health Care, Dr Isaulina Barreto. She expressed her gratitude for the LabCoP project and for understanding the objectives of the assessment, encouraging the country team to take the opportunity to improve the national laboratory systems.



Charles KI-ZERBO visit the Ministry of Health with Dr Sequeira, Dr Barreto, and Dr Batista

The LabCoP Management team, accompanied by Dr Yardlene Sequeira, reference laboratory manager and country Team Leader; and Dr Andreza Batista, Department of Epidemiological Surveillance Manager, also visited the World Health Organization (WHO) office. There, during a dialogue with Dr Vilfrido Santana Gil, who is responsible for WHO's health emergency response sector, the need for collaboration it was emphasized for advocacy in response to the gaps that the evaluation detected. Some of the areas needing support included: integrated sample transport, laboratory information system, waste management, quality management system, training of staff on molecular biology and the integration of diagnostic systems and networks in general.

São Tomé's sound practices of demand creation and maintaining the clinical staff's continuing training on HIV VL can be shared with the LabCoP community through ECHO sessions, so that other countries may learn from their experiences and improve their own systems. São Tomé also has a well-defined list of priority diseases, including some zoonotic diseases, and has some testing in progress for these diseases, making it easier to elaborate and disseminate guidelines for integrated diagnostic testing. The assessment report has been shared with the country and a work plan has been drafted and discussed. The country is refining the work plan so that it can be validated by the country for use in advocating for support with the Ministry of Health partners and other stakeholders. Further assessments are planned in the future to monitor implementation of interventions.

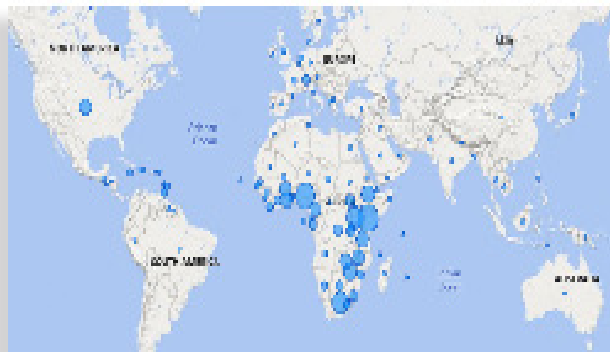


Members of LabCoP Mgt team and São Tomé Country Team with Dr Vilfrido Santana Gil (R)



ECHO Sessions Summaries: October 2023 to April 2024

Between October 2023 and April 2024, the African Society for Laboratory Medicine (ASLM), in collaboration with partners, convened 10 ECHO sessions through the LabCoP project. On average 297 unique connections were realised from 550 registrations per session. Participants typically spent an average of 40 (± 22) minutes in the ~1-hour long sessions, and while predominantly from Africa, participants listened in from almost every continent in the world. Below is an overview of some key topics covered during this period.



Locations of ECHO Session participants around the world

Viral Suppression and HIV Transmission: the Evidence, WHO Policy Brief and

Following the release of the World Health Organization's policy brief with guidance on the role of HIV viral suppression and the publication of a Lancet systematic review that credited undetectable levels of the virus with improved individual health and halting onward HIV transmission, LabCoP convened an [Extended session in October 2023](#) to highlight key details and their implications for country-level programmes. There was deliberate emphasis on what the three categories of viral load levels mean for individual and public health interventions. Additionally, in [February 2024](#), a session was convened on a related topic: low level viremia (LLV). Based on three studies conducted in Uganda to determine factors associated with LLV, perceptions of LLV among healthcare workers and clients and the effectiveness of intensive adherence counselling for achieving undetectable viral load among clients with LLV show the evidence is clear and clients with LLV need our attention!

Waste Management SubCoP

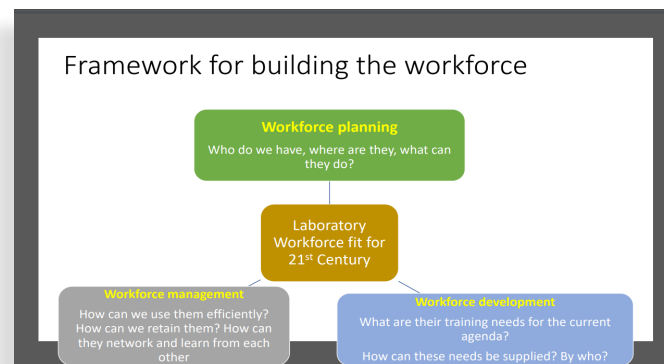
Through the LabCoP's [Waste Management Sub-Community of Practice](#), ASLM convened a session in December 2023 on sustainable waste management. Presenter Janita Hoffman from Medi-Clave in South Africa provided an overview of a holistic approach to a successful, sufficient and sustainable waste management system with a focus on autoclaving, bio-digestion and recycling. Having a comprehensive waste management system backed by competent policies, guidelines and staff with appropriately chosen technologies that are properly deployed and maintained is an obligation for every institution. Watch the waste management ECHO session [here](#).

Diagnostic Network Optimisation Sub-Community of Practice (DNO-SubCoP)

ASLM in collaboration with the [Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics \(FIND\)](#), through the [Diagnostic Network Optimisation \(DNO\) Sub-Community of Practice \(SubCoP\)](#) hosted two sessions focussed on integrated DNO implementation. The sessions highlighted experiences and lessons learned from Kenya during the session held in [October 2023](#), which demonstrated that implementing an integrated DNO exercise is efficient on resources and still provides answers for individual disease programs and from Côte d'Ivoire during the session held in [March 2024](#).

Laboratory Professionals for the 21st Century: Building a Force Fit for Purpose

In a session held in February 2024, the presenter, Dr Suzanne Kiwanuka from Makerere University in Uganda, explored what the laboratory workforce of the 21st century should look like. Dr Kiwanuka highlighted the importance of expanding laboratorians' training beyond just technical skills and having a workforce that is periodically evaluated and adequately compensated and that is kept up to date on One Health, technology advances, globalization and pandemics. Watch the session [here](#).



Slide from Dr Kiwanuka's presentation on Adapting the Laboratory Workforce for the 21st Century from the February LabCoP ECHO session

Global Priorities, Surveys and Country Level Experiences

ASLM conducted four other sessions covering additional topics. An [October 2023 session](#) covered priorities and strategies for The Global Fund's 2023-2028 funding cycle. In [March 2024](#), presenters from Cepheid and the Clinton Health Access Initiative discussed advancing paediatric HIV care through the introduction of the Xpert HIV Qual XC test. Also in [March 2024](#), Malawi and partner Cooper / Smith presented their experience in improving turn-around times for results return through the deployment of electronic applications. The aim was to enhance clinical management & outcomes for people living with HIV by providing a digital, user-friendly application, backed by a sustainable, reliable architecture that facilitates results access at any time, from any location. Implementation was done in phases, from a feasibility study, application architecture design, piloting to Monitoring and evaluation. At the end of the pilot period, TAT for enrolled clients and facilities were reduced by about half, with no reported occurrence of unintentional disclosure of status.

Look out for exciting new ECHO sessions in the coming months.

LabNetLead Course Training Underway for Nigeria!

The LabCoP project rolled out its Laboratory Network Leadership (LabNetLead) course for Nigeria's National Laboratory Technical Working Group (TWG) from 4-8 March 2024. The LabNetLead course introduces essential concepts and activities to design, optimise, lead and manage functional, high-quality national laboratory networks through five training sessions or activities. The course is part of ASLM's LabCoP programme, which focuses on human health laboratory network leadership and management.



Course participants and facilitators

Nigeria's National Tuberculosis Reference Laboratory Director, Mr Elom Emeka, and LabCoP Project Manager, Mr Francis Ocen, officially opened the training. Twenty TWG members responsible for managing both the public and private sector laboratory network in Nigeria attended the training. Mr Elom thanked ASLM for accepting and fast tracking their request for this course and encouraged attendees to diligently participate to improve both their individual and the national capacity to lead and manage Nigeria's tiered laboratory network.



Mr Adedamola Oyekunde, presents on the current structuring and mgt of Nigeria's tiered lab network

Mr Ocen thanked the Nigeria Ministry of Health for the productive collaboration in multiple areas between the country and ASLM, further noting that the course would bring additional perspectives and tools to what participants may already know or are currently using.

On 8 March, Dr Elochukwu Adibo, President of the Guild of Private Medical Laboratory Directors (GMLD) Nigeria, expressed immense



Mr Elom Emeka, opens the training

gratitude to both Nigeria's Ministry of Health and ASLM for extending the invitation to GMLD and availing their leadership an opportunity to attend the course. He acknowledged the need to align the structuring of private and public sector

laboratories through a unified, well managed, tiered network. He further noted that the tools covered in the sessions will go a long way towards helping their members to lead and manage private sector laboratories better and improve their continued contribution to individual patient management, as well as public and global health responses.



Agnes Juru, one of the facilitators, recaps the day

This meeting was the first of two in-person LabNetLead trainings that covered the structuring, governance, and tools used in managing a national tiered lab network. The second face-to-face training will be delivered during the first week of June 2024.

The other three trainings are run as either individual or group assignments.

Readiness Assessment of Clinical Laboratory Systems and Networks in Gabon for Diagnostic Services Integration

A workshop to assess the readiness of Gabon's clinical laboratory systems and networks for the integration of diagnostic services was held in Libreville 18-19 March 2024. The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of Gabon has participated in ASLM's LabCoP since 2022, and a baseline self-assessment of Gabon's laboratory systems supporting scale-up of HIV viral load testing was conducted in August 2022. A follow-up assessment of the resulting action plan implementation was completed in November 2023. The goal of the March 2024 workshop was to identify gaps in critical components of integration and develop solutions to successfully integrate laboratory services.



Participants, including (L to R) Prof Joël Fleury Djoba Siawaya, Director of LNSP (centre, in white), Dr Elise Eyang Obame, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, and Mr Bernard Nzondo Kombe, General Director of Laboratories and Medical Imaging

For two days, participants assessed all key areas of diagnostic services integration in Gabon in accordance with the requirements of Universal Health Coverage and the recommendations of the Maputo Declaration. Participants included the LabCoP country team, which includes members from the National Public Health Laboratory (LNSP), Lambaréné Medical Research Center (CERMEL), National Program for the Fight against Tuberculosis (PNLT), National Program for the Fight against Sexually Transmitted Infections and HIV/AIDS (PNLIST), Central Medical Analysis Laboratory, General Directorate of Animal Health and Livestock (DGE), Institute of Public Hygiene and Sanitation (IHPA) and Africa CDC/Gabon. They were joined by high-level representatives from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, including the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Dr Elise Eyang Obame, as well as others from the General Directorate of Laboratories and Medical Imaging (DGLIM), LNSP, the Central Directorate of Human Resources, the Central Directorate of Financial Affairs, and the Directorate of Health Management



Dr Elise Eyang Obame chairs the opening ceremony

Information Systems. The country team was supported by ASLM consultants including Dr Marguerite Massinga Loembé, Dr Krystina Mengue Me Ngou-Milama, Mr Ki-Zerbo Charles Lamou, and Ms Mariamo Ibraimo Assane.

The opening ceremony of the workshop was chaired by the Permanent Secretary, Dr Eyang Obame, representing the Minister of Health. In her speech, she thanked the LabCoP project for its support in strengthening Gabon's laboratory network and reassured the participants of the support of the Ministry of Health regarding the implementation of the recommendations resulting from the evaluation.

Workshop attendees developed consolidated work plan to successfully integrate diagnostic services to improve and maintain access to laboratory services. The LabCoP team will assess its implementation over the next two years.



Participants in a working session on day one

Expert Experience



The LabCoP Management Team recently sat down with Theresa Sumani Msikuwanga, Assistant Director of Health Technical Support Services at the Malawi Ministry of Health, and Member of the Malawi LabCoP country team, to discuss their experience implementing ASLM's [LabMaP](#) programme into their country plan. LabMaP, a partnership between ASLM and [InSTEDD](#), and funded by the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), aims to establish a system for the collection, storage and analysis of GIS-linked data on laboratory capacity, systems and networks in Africa. LabMaP provides a solution to countries that are ready to inventory geo-located information on their laboratory systems, in support of evidence-based decision making.

ASLM: What was the impetus for Malawi's engagement with LabMaP?

Ms Msikuwanga: Malawi engaged ASLM to implement LabMaP, because we wanted to understand our available capacity across our laboratory networks, which involved all sectors including human, animal and environmental health. namely to seek to see the disease.

ASLM: What activities took place as you began to implement LabMaP?

Ms Msikuwanga: Prior to commencing to map our laboratories, representatives from human and animal health went through a [LabNetLead](#) training, which aimed at building leadership skills among the participants, as well as enhancing their understanding of laboratory networks and systems. Resources were mobilised and we determined the number of laboratories to be mapped for each tier. Laboratory mapping was then conducted in two phases, one in May 2023 and the other in February 2024, according to available resources. The LabMaP data was then

validated and analysed to identify gaps and priority areas within the network in order to come up with remedial actions.

ASLM: How did the LabCoP Management Team help you launch the LabMaP initiative?

Ms Msikuwanga: The LabCoP Management Team was quite critical to our success. They helped us through training and provision of technical assistance to build capacity among data collectors in order to achieve quality data collection.

ASLM: How are you using the data you are collecting to improve health outcomes in Malawi?

Ms Msikuwanga: That LabMaP data was used to establish available capacities and strengths across the laboratory network that needed reinforcement. It helped identify gaps and set priorities for improvement within the network. The data has also been crucial in designing optimisation scenarios for the network.

ASLM: What benefits have you seen from the LabMaP programme so far?

Ms Msikuwanga: The LabMaP programme provides visual representation and relationships amongst tiers and services provided across the Malawi's laboratory network. It creates opportunities for optimisation of the diagnostic network, an integrated sample referral system and strengthening of our One Health approach to public response to epidemics and disease surveillance.

ASLM: What guidance would you give to other countries who have not yet implemented the LabMaP programme?

Ms Msikuwanga: Laboratory mapping is critical in the delivery of laboratory services. Countries should strongly consider adopting the LabMaP programme, as it provides opportunities to gain insights during efforts to strengthen a laboratory network.

What's New

Welcoming the Republic of Guinea LabCoP Team

The LabCoP Management Team is pleased to announce that the Republic of Guinea has joined the LabCoP family! They will perform their first self-assessment in the coming weeks. Please join us in welcoming the Republic of Guinea to the LabCoP family. Bienvenue, République de Guinée!

New LabCoP Country Dashboard

The LabCoP Management Team has been hard at work developing country-specific dashboards for country teams to utilize for monitoring, measuring and analysing relevant data in key areas of laboratory system strengthening. The dashboard consolidates the various assessments conducted over time and enables better work plan development, planning and easier navigation. Look out for the launch of the new dashboard in June 2024.

LabCoP Annual Meeting Report

The LabCoP 2023 Meeting Report is hot off the presses and, for the first time, is available in English, French and Portuguese! Check out the summaries of the dynamic presentations that were made at the meeting, which took place on the sidelines of ASLM2023. Read the reports [here](#).



Looking Ahead

New Recipe in LabCoP's Cookbook of Best Practices

The LabCoP Management Team is preparing a new recipe about electronic return of results for inclusion in the Cookbook of Best Practices. Look out for the new recipe in June 2024. Until then, make sure to check out the other recipes in the cookbook. Each recipe is a collection of key considerations and best practices resulting from the south-to-south information sharing of LabCoP country teams. All are freely available from the [LabCoP website](#).

Upcoming ECHO sessions

LabCoP will host some exciting ECHO sessions over the next few months, including sessions about:

- Joint Advocacy, Funding Approaches, and Lessons Learned: Exploring Case Studies and Gaining Insights from Cross-Disease Collaborations
- Liquid Waste Management, Including GTC: Lessons from Uganda and Nigeria
- National Equipment Maintenance and Calibration Centre Set up and Operation

Check out the full archive of past LabCoP ECHO Sessions [here](#).

2024 Annual LabCoP Meeting

Preparations for the highly-anticipated annual LabCoP meeting are well under way. This year, the meeting will convene in Abidjan, Côte D'Ivoire. This will be LabCoP's seventh annual meeting and is shaping up to be one of the best yet. Expect an exciting meeting full of presentations and breakouts about innovations and progress in laboratory systems strengthening. Stay tuned for more updates!



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