

# AREF History Report

AREF 10th Anniversary Impact Evaluation

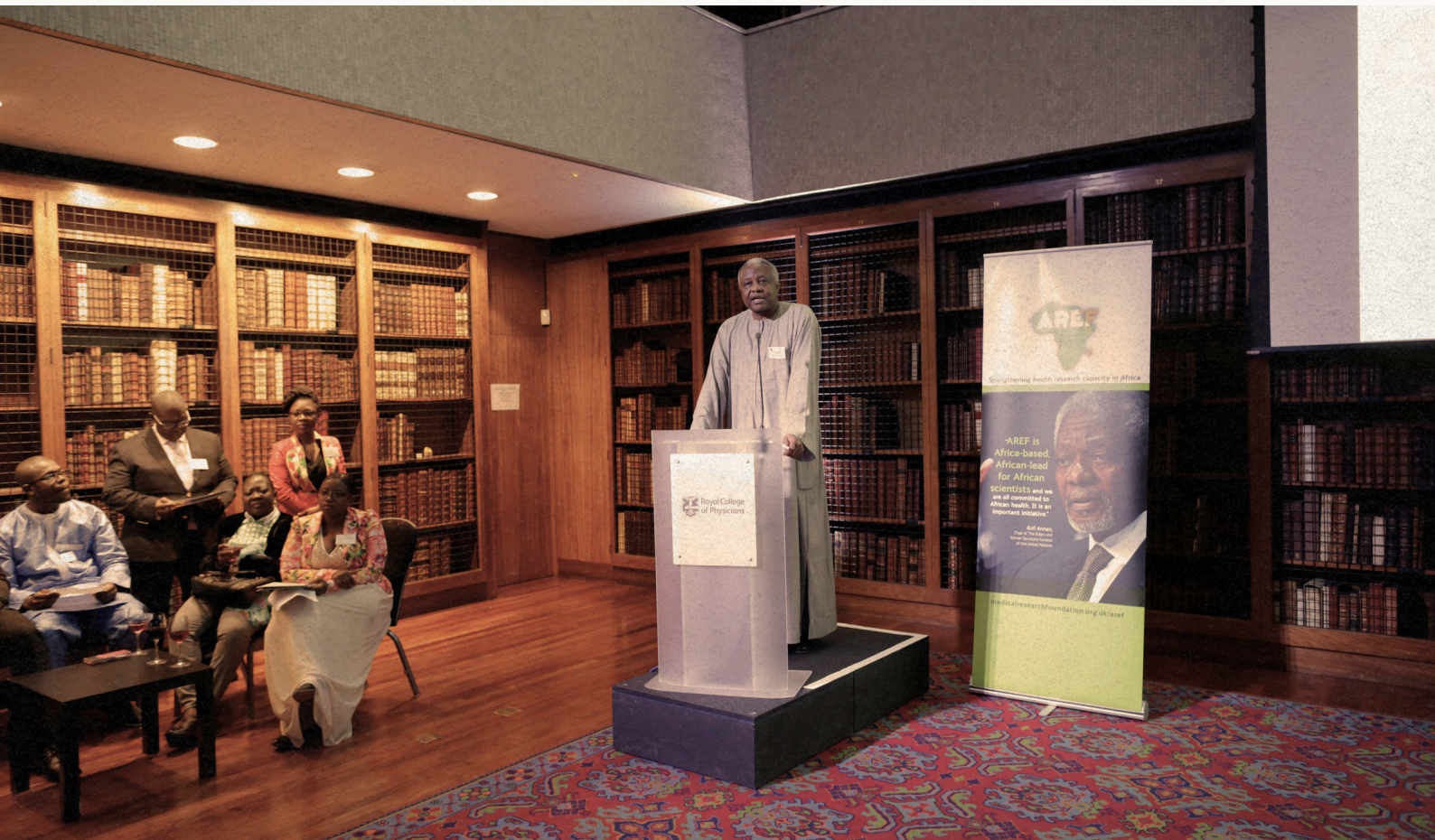
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# The Beginning of the Africa Research Excellence Fund (AREF)



## A Vision for Change

In 2015, the Africa Research Excellence Fund (AREF) was born from a bold vision: to transform the future of African health research by addressing the structural challenges hindering research development. Supported by the Medical Research Foundation (MRF) and the Medical Research Council (MRC), AREF was founded to tackle pressing issues holding back African research. This included: limited research capacity, grant and postdoctoral training opportunities as well as underrepresentation of African researchers in senior positions and challenges in self-sufficiency to drive research leadership. These challenges gave way to a strong mission to nurture African researchers and empower them to take the lead in addressing the continent's health priorities.



Professor Sir Tumani Corrah

“When I walked into the [MRC] camp the first day. I was shocked to find that there are not many other Africans in key positions in the unit. And I wondered why? Why is it that there was a paucity of African scientists in the unit? And what can we do to change it?”

At the heart of this effort was Professor Sir Tumani Corrah, a visionary leader who turned personal experience into action. Inspired by his own journey and the guidance of MRC’s then-Director Brian Greenwood, Professor Corrah sought to break down the barriers to African leadership in research.

“The way he [Brian Greenwood] convinced me to join the [MRC Unit in the Gambia] was to say to me ‘unless Africans like you join the unit, the status quo will remain the same.’”



Early in his career, he championed opportunities for African students to study abroad, revealing the vast, untapped potential within the continent. With the right support, it was clear that African scientists were not just capable of succeeding... they could thrive and lead globally. This conviction became the driving force behind AREF’s mission: to unlock Africa’s scientific brilliance and elevate its leaders to the forefront of global health research.

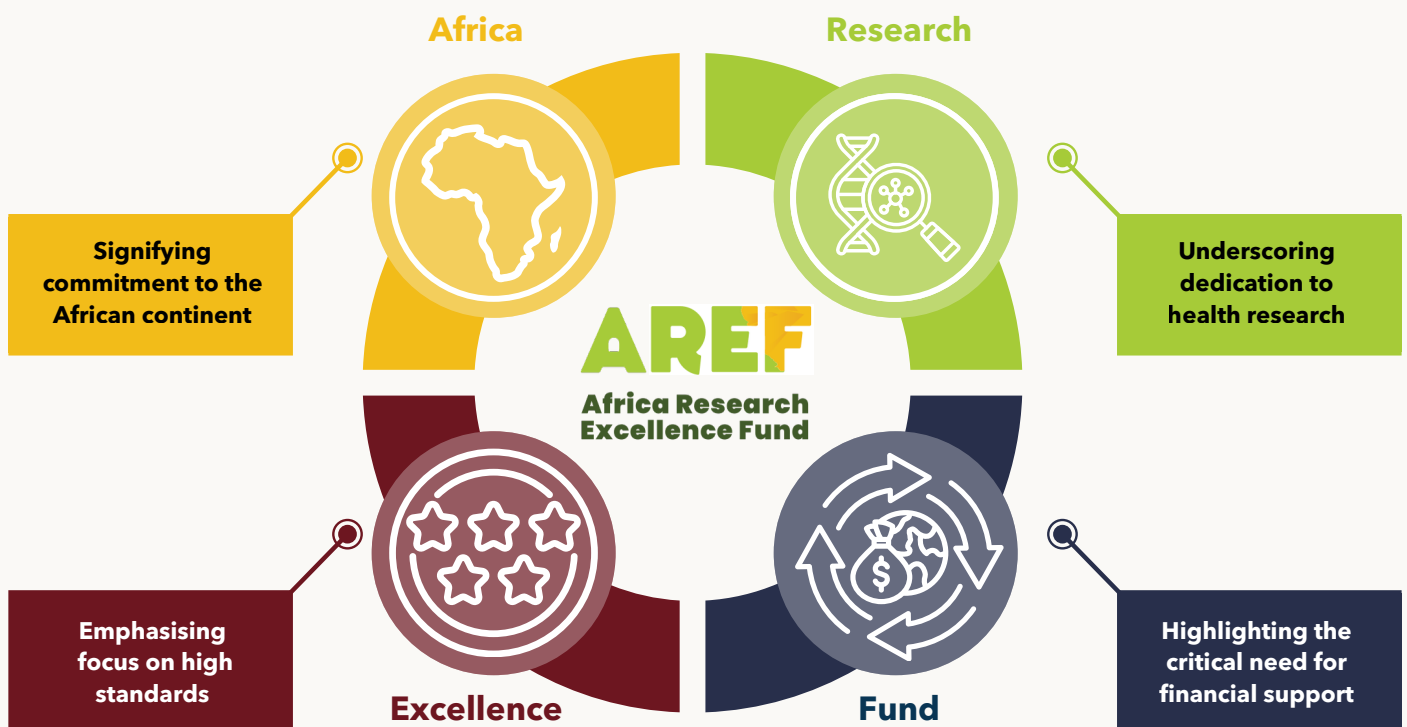
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“We must invest in promising young African scientists; they are the innovators and leaders that will transform our continent’s health. The African Research Excellence Fund is Africa-based, African-led, for African scientists and we are all committed to African health. It is an important initiative.”

**The late Kofi Annan,  
Former UN Secretary General**

# Building a Foundation

Funded by a transformative £1.5 million grant from the MRF, AREF was officially established as a UK-registered charity. Each element of its name was chosen with purpose. **“Africa”** signifying its commitment to the continent; **“Excellence”** emphasizing its focus on high standards; **“Research”** underscoring its dedication to health research; and **“Fund”** highlighting the critical need for financial support. From the beginning, AREF set out to change the African research landscape by providing African scientists with the tools, mentorship, and funding to not only advance their careers but to lead transformative change.



## Early Programmes and Milestones

In its early years, AREF launched transformative programmes that reached over 300 researchers across 34 African countries and laid the groundwork for its future growth. The core initiatives, such as Research Development Fellowships (RDF), Grant Writing Workshops, and the Excell African Health Researcher Development and Leadership Programme empowered researchers to lead impactful projects and build strong research teams. Despite these successes, challenges persisted in securing sustainable funding and gaining support from African governments and institutions.



## A Decade of Growth and Innovation

As the needs of African researchers evolved, so did AREF's programmes. Starting with the RDF programme in 2015, AREF steadily expanded its offerings to support the diverse goals of researchers. In 2021, the launch of the women-only Women in Research (WiR) Grant Writing and Scientific Writing Programme broke new ground by addressing gender gaps in research leadership. Other impactful programs, like the Towards Leadership Programme, Communications Masterclasses, and Publication Writing Workshops, have equipped hundreds of researchers with essential skills. By 2024, AREF's network had grown to over 800 researchers—a remarkable testament to its reach and impact.

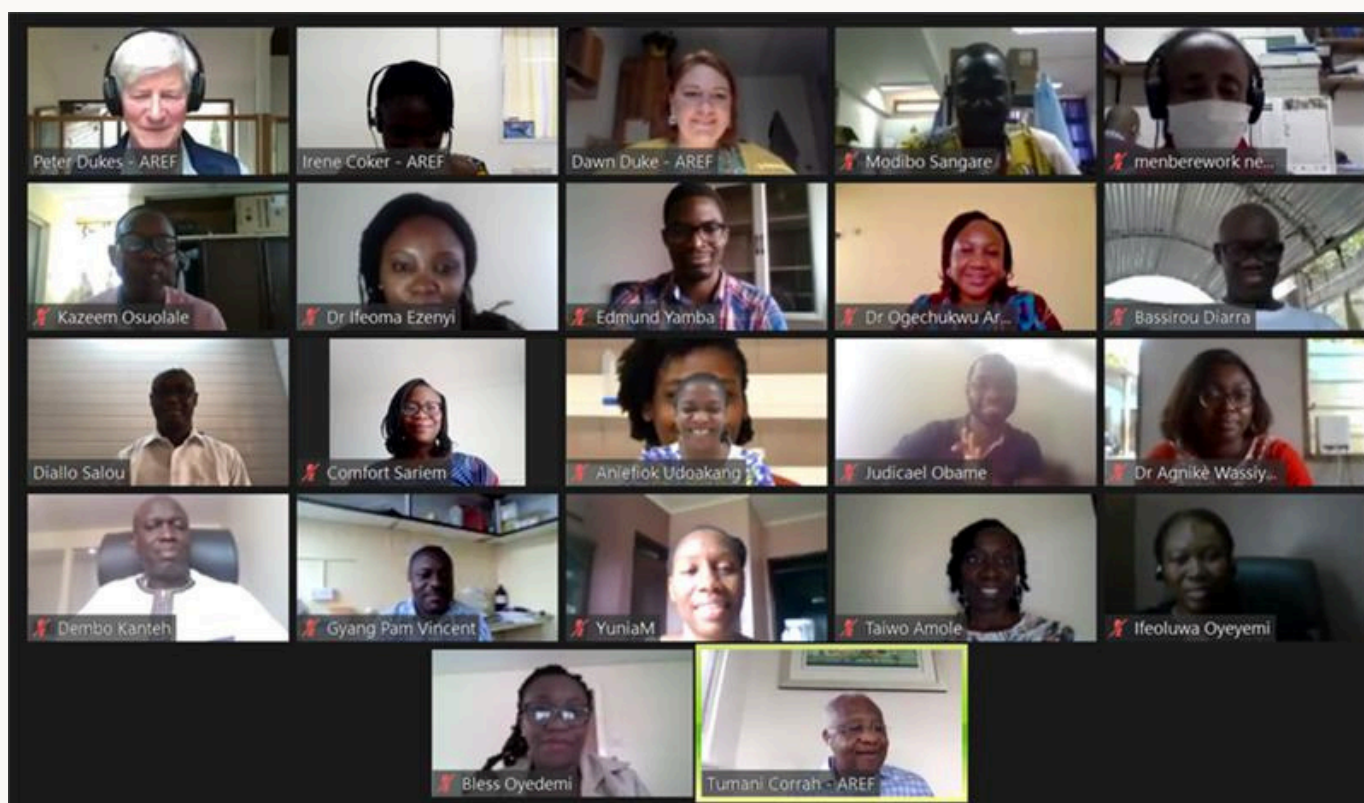
AREF's growth is also reflected in its dedicated team. Starting with just two staff members in 2015, the organization has now more than tripled its workforce to 19 full-time staff to help AREF continue to grow and expand its impact.



## Navigating Challenges and Adapting

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unforeseen challenges, but AREF adapted with resilience and innovation. As travel restrictions and unreliable internet disrupted in-person workshops, AREF pivoted to virtual delivery, recording sessions to ensure no one was left behind. The pandemic reinforced the vital role of African-led scientific innovation and further strengthened AREF's mission to equip researchers with the skills to tackle pressing global challenges.

AREF's funding has evolved from its initial reliance on MRF and MRC grants to a diversified portfolio supported by organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, LSHTM, GSK, EC Horizon, EACCR, IAVI, BMS, EA Foundation<sup>1</sup>, Roche, among others, as well as by individual donations. However, funding remains a key challenge for sustaining operational costs and expanding its reach. AREF is now calling on the African diaspora and philanthropists to join its mission, ensuring the continuity of its impactful programmes.



<sup>1</sup> LSHTM - London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

GSK - GlaxoSmithKline

EC Horizon - European Commission Horizon (typically referring to Horizon Europe, the EU's funding program for research and innovation)

EACCR - East African Consortium for Clinical Research

IAVI - International AIDS Vaccine Initiative

BMS - Bristol Myers Squibb

EA Foundation - East African Foundation

# Towards an African-Led Future

In 2021, AREF embarked on a bold new chapter, separating from the MRF to become an independent charity with its headquarters in The Gambia. This step toward autonomy signaled more than just a change in structure, it was a powerful statement of intent. Now fully African-led, AREF has placed the continent's voices and perspectives at the heart of its mission to shape health research for the future.



**Professor Akhere Omonkhua CEO AREF**

A defining moment came in 2024 with the appointment of Professor Akhere Omonkhua, an alumna of AREF's Excell Programme, as the CEO of AREF. Her journey from programme participant to organizational leader reflects AREF's commitment to nurturing African talent and leadership. Under her guidance, AREF is poised to reach even greater heights, demonstrating that its programmes don't just support researchers...they create future leaders.



Prof Omonkhua, CEO - "I want AREF to be the go-to place when it comes to post-doctoral health researcher development. When people are talking about developing health researchers in Africa, let them think 1st about AREF. Not because of any [thing], just because we are good at this. This is what we do, and we have had 10 years to perfect this and we have shown the impact."



# The Road Ahead

As AREF marks its 10th anniversary, the organization is looking to the future with ambitious goals. Over the next decade, AREF aims to:

- **Become the Leading Health Research Development Organization in Africa:** AREF aspires to be the foremost institution for developing postdoctoral health researchers on the continent.
- **Expand Opportunities:** By growing funding and partnerships, AREF plans to support even more researchers through its programmes, with the RDFs remaining a cornerstone of impact.
- **Drive Policy Change:** AREF envisions working with African institutions to create policies that support early-career researchers, retain the best talent, and foster innovation.
- **Promote Inclusivity and Representation:** Building on the success of its women-focused programmes, AREF will continue to champion gender equity and inclusivity across health research.
- **Secure Long-Term Sustainability:** Through diversified funding and stronger connections with the African diaspora, AREF is committed to building a stable financial foundation for its future.

AREF's story is one of impact, triumph and dedication. Over the past decade, it has empowered hundreds of researchers to tackle Africa's most pressing health challenges, creating ripples of change that extend far beyond the labs. As it steps into its second decade, AREF's mission remains clear: to identify, support, and elevate African talent, ensuring that the continent's health challenges are met by those who know them best.



# Evolution of AREF

2015



Africa Research Excellence Fund (AREF) was founded by Professor Sir Tumani Corrah and supported by the Medical Research Foundation.

2016



**CHARITY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND AND WALES**



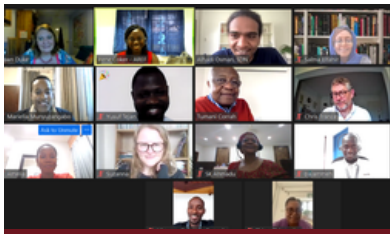
Registered as an independent charity with MRF as its Trustee.

2018



100th mark of AREF participants reached.

2020



A turning point that saw the addition of virtual training programmes to ensure business continuity during the pandemic, accelerating AREF's growth in the process.

2021

### Session Objectives

#### DRAFT Session objectives:

(1) To enable you to develop a curriculum and plan for a grantwriting event/programme relevant to your own objectives, experiences/roles and context; (2) To practice delivery of learning through individual and group work; and (3) Consider how to evaluate Grantwriting support.

Do these objectives meet your needs and expectations: Is there anything missing? Do let me know by email!

<p>• Enable you to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Develop your curriculum &amp; programme</li> <li>✓ Access resources</li> <li>✓ Evaluate your event / programme</li> </ul> <p>• Practice</p>	<p>• My objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ What: Structure &amp; content</li> <li>✓ How: Pedagogy &amp; evaluation</li> <li>✓ How/where: To access resources</li> <li>✓ Contexts: Being aware, realistic &amp; practical</li> </ul>
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Created a 'train the trainer programme' and the mentoring component of the RDF programme to provide more developmental opportunities

2024



Prof Akhere Omonkhua, an AREF Alumna assumes office as the CEO of AREF.

2015



AREF launched the first cohort of the Research Development Fellowships (RDF) with 7 awardees.

2016



AREF launched the first cohort of the Grant Writing Programme, commissioned with 25 participants.

2019

AREF launched the first cohort of the Towards Leadership Programme, commissioned through the UK Global Challenges Research Fund with 10 participants.

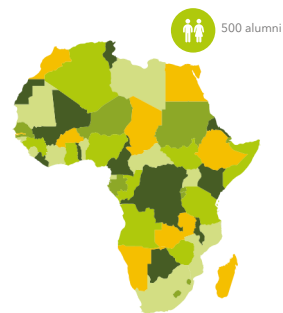


2021



Registered as an independent charity.

2023



500 AREF participants reached.