



# AREF's Partnership Report

AREF's Partnership with Institutions and Its  
Institutional Capacity-Building Programmes:  
A Focus on Equitable Collaboration

Prepared by:

Dr Adebisi Adeyeye  
Katie Tiley  
Dr Jo Blodgett

March 2025

# The Context of Research Partnerships in Africa

For health research in Africa to thrive, both individual scientists and local institutions need support. Strong partnerships are key to building a thriving research ecosystem and tackling critical health, environmental, and economic challenges. However, institutional collaborations face significant obstacles, including funding disparities, socio-economic barriers, and unequal access to resources.

While South Africa invests nearly 1% of its GDP in research - aligning with African Union recommendations (Maina et al., 2021) - many other countries struggle to secure local funding. Underfunded institutions lack the resources to conduct research effectively (Okunoye et al., 2023), leading to reduced participation in global research networks and restricting knowledge-sharing and research productivity (Igwaran & Edoamodu, 2021).

Collaboration holds the power to change this. By sharing resources, expertise, and infrastructure, institutions can strengthen research capabilities, drive innovation, and become more competitive for global research funding. Initiatives such as researcher exchanges and data-sharing platforms can promote skills development and cultivate a stronger research culture. For these partnerships to be truly transformative, however, they must be equitable. Too often, African institutions bear a heavy administrative burden, without having an equal voice in shaping research priorities (Molosi-France & Makoni, 2020). True progress will come when African institutions can take a leading role in shaping research agendas and building an equitable and collaborative future, rather than reinforcing existing disparities.





# Building Stronger Research Institutes: AREF's Excell and RDF Programmes

While AREF's core mission is to develop the research capacity of early career scientists, it has taken bold steps to strengthen African research institutions. The Excell Researcher and Leadership Development Programme has been central to this effort as a transformative initiative designed to nurture leadership, foster collaboration, and embed long-term institutional change.

At its core, the Excell Programme is a two-year programme that empowers early and mid-career researchers to become catalysts for transformation within their institutions. Excell aims to go beyond just individual growth to creating sustainable institutional change.

Launched in 2017, Excell-1 engaged six institutions across West Africa (Ghana and Nigeria) and East Africa (Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda), training Institutional Leads (IL) and promising early career researchers. Its success led to Excell-2, which deepened the programme's impact by embedding sustainable policies and best practices in participating institutions. By March 2022, the programme had developed a strong network of empowered leaders and stronger research institutions.

During the pilot Excell Programme, AREF partnered with six key institutions and 26 researchers to fulfil the aims of this ambitious initiative:

- Africa Population for Health Research Centre (APHRC) (Kenya)
- Ifakara Health Institute (IHI) (Tanzania)
- Centre of Excellence in Reproductive Health Innovation (CERHI), University of Benin (Nigeria)
- Makerere University School of Public Health (MakSPH) (Uganda)
- Kumasi Centre for Collaborative Research in Tropical Medicine (KCCR) (Ghana)
- Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI) (Uganda)

The Excell Programme's impact has been profound. Participating institutions witnessed strengthened commitment to researcher development, improved funding success rates, and the advancement of African researchers into leadership roles. The programme also increased research visibility and deepened engagement with policymakers and the public. Challenges such as institutional constraints, COVID-19 disruptions, administrative burdens, and funding limits have tested participants, yet the Excell Programme sparked a shift in research ecosystems and cultures. Today, it continues to shape a new generation of African scientists, reinforcing Africa's role in global health research.

# Case Study: Strengthening Research Capacity at Ifakara Health Institute, Tanzania

The Ifakara Health Institute (IHI) is one of Tanzania's leading health research institutions, dedicated to advancing scientific research and healthcare solutions. Through the Excell Programme, IHI aimed to strengthen its research capacity, improve project management, and boost scientific visibility.

Led by a dedicated five-member team, the IHI Excell project directly impacted 80 scientists and administrators by introducing two core training workshops in 2021:

1. Financial Planning and Control (n=25 participants): Addressed challenges such as budget forecasting, managing fund expenditure, and financial reporting issues.
2. Science Communication and Media Engagement (n=55 participants): Equipped researchers with the skills to effectively communicate their scientific findings to policymakers, the media, and the public.

The impact of the IHI Excell project was immediate and lasting. Quarterly financial management training is now institutionalised, ensuring continuous financial oversight among project leaders and administrators. Scientists at the IHI also embraced media engagement, recognising the need to extend their research communication beyond academic circles and present their findings in more accessible ways. One major milestone was the creation of a dedicated audio and video recording studio. Today, each scientist with an accepted research paper records a short video summarising their work, which is then shared through IHI's communication channels.

These efforts are already shaping public discourse. For example, IHI scientists trained through the programme have participated in media discussions on key health issues, ranging from the WHO-approved Mosquirix malaria vaccine to Tanzania's COVID-19 response. IHI is now expanding its online presence further, even exploring the launch of a TV programme to amplify its research activities for the public.



## Research Development Fellowship (RDF)

The RDF has also played a crucial role in strengthening African research institutions. By providing African researchers with access to world-class training through a 3, 6, or 9-month placement at a centre of research excellence in Africa or Europe, the training and conducive learning environments of these institutions equips scientists with enhanced leadership, quality assessment, and laboratory management skills. Beyond gaining these skills, many RDF fellows return home with advanced scientific equipment, drastically improving the feasibility and quality of their research while expanding institutional capabilities. As a result, these researchers pass on their knowledge to others in their home institution, training local scientists in advanced techniques and fostering a culture of continuous learning.

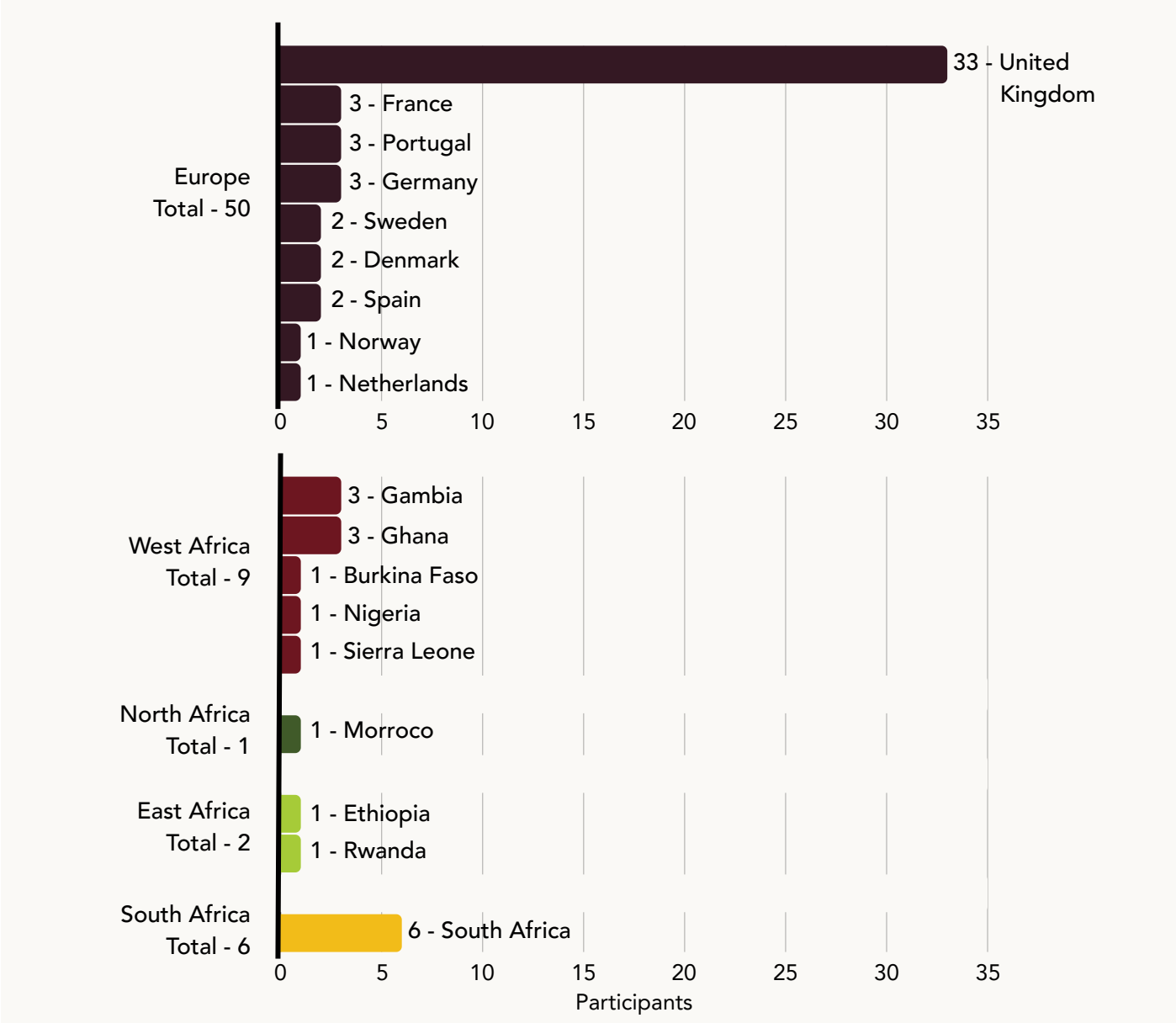
"This was so influential to me regarding what I wanted to do in Burkina Faso. When I was in the lab {placement in Spain}, I learnt how they were organized and even for the experiments, we did pilot studies, checked samples and did some quality controls. In Africa, I was not as familiar with it."

**Associate Research Professor in Parasitology,  
Burkina Faso, GWP 2019, RDF-EDCTP 20, TL 2022**

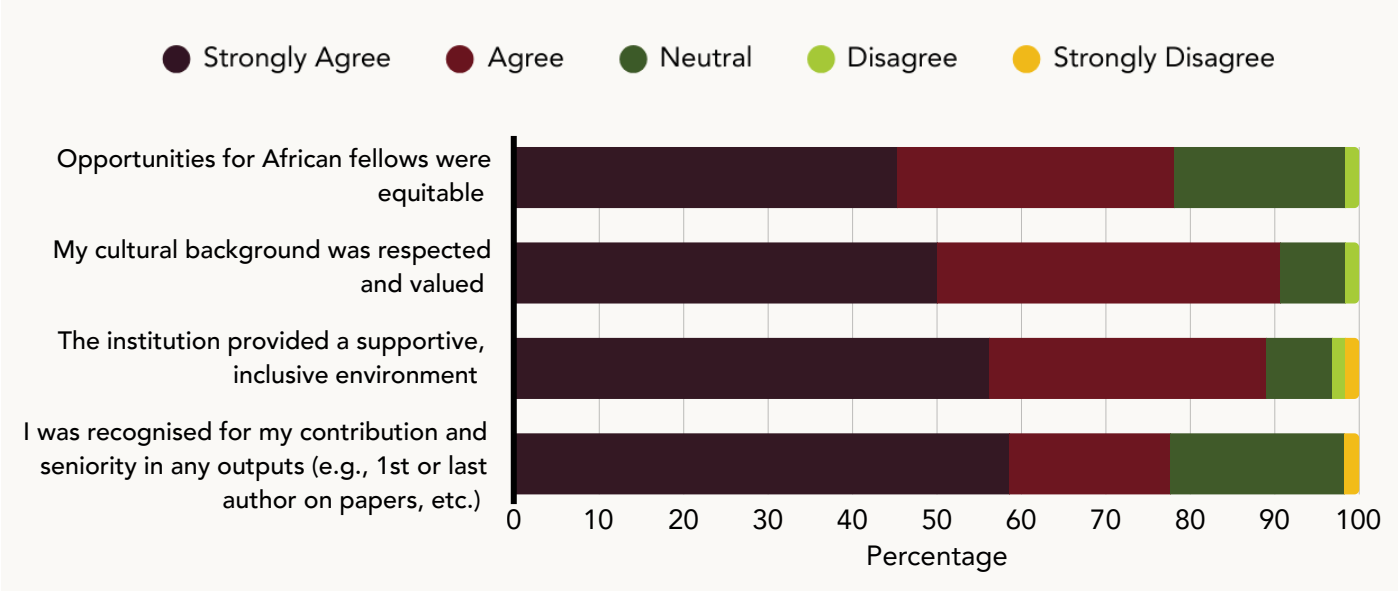
"I now have a functioning molecular biology laboratory. I can work with bacteria from isolation till sequencing and bioinformatics analysis to unravel mechanism of antibiotics resistance. This is the only laboratory that can do that at the College of Medicine, University of Lagos".

**Senior Lecturer, Nigeria, RDF 2021, AREF Seed  
Fund Recipient 2023 -2024**

Regions and Countries of RDF Host Institutions



RDF Participants' Perceptions on Equity and Inclusivity in Host Institutions



The Likert scale demonstrates how much RDF participants agree with several statements on equitable and inclusive opportunities. The numbers on the left combine 'strongly agree' and 'agree' and the numbers on the right combine 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree'

Through both the Excell and RDF programmes, AREF has laid a strong foundation for long-term sustainability of research institutions in Africa, equipping scientists and administrators with the skills, knowledge, and tools needed to drive impactful research and shape the future of global health research.

### ***Equity during RDF placements***

The majority of RDF alumni (78%) reported feeling that they were given equitable opportunities during their placements (see Figure above). Many felt that respect was shown toward their backgrounds, with institutions fostering supportive and inclusive environments for their work. Notably, a significant number of respondents highlighted being recognised for their contributions, with several securing first or supervising author positions in publications, underscoring the value placed on their expertise and seniority during their visits.

## **AREF's Commitment to Equity in Research Partnerships**

Equitable collaboration (both North-South and South-South) is also essential for impactful research, yet many institutional partnerships face equity challenges. AREF has taken proactive steps to address this issue through its Equitable Partnership Programme which trains researchers on how to recognise, challenge, and overcome inequities inherent in global health research. Launched in 2023, this programme has engaged 28 participants, and early feedback has highlighted its transformative impact. The impact evaluation survey captured 10 participants and revealed that:

- 70% reported a direct positive impact on their career.
- 100% have actively applied the partnership framework to strengthen collaboration.
- 90% have developed guidance to promote equity within their research groups.
- 100% are actively sharing best practices in equitable partnerships beyond their immediate networks.
- 100% reported greater self-awareness of personal and cultural beliefs, leading to more inclusive and effective collaborations.

Although still in its infancy, AREF's Equitable Partnership Programme is already changing the way that researchers collaborate, embedding principles of fairness, inclusivity, and shared responsibility in African-led research initiatives. As the programme grows, its long-term impact will shape a future where equity is at the heart of all institutional partnerships.

# Fostering Inclusive and Equitable Partnerships for the Future

To create truly inclusive and mutually beneficial research partnerships, AREF and its partners can take key strategic steps:

1. Expand training and capacity building: Expanding the Equitable Partnerships Programme and the Excell Programme will empower more African researchers and institutional leaders with the skills to lead impactful research and drive institutional change.
2. Strengthen regional collaboration hubs: Facilitating intra-African partnerships will enable institutions to collaborate before engaging with international collaborators, fostering knowledge exchange and increasing Africa's collective influence in global research partnerships.
3. Advocate for fair funding policies: AREF can work with funders to prioritise African-led research, ensure equitable resource distribution, sustainable investment and support long-term institutional growth rather than short-term project outputs.
4. Build sustainable institutional support: Developing long-term financial models (e.g. endowment funds and strategic government partnerships) will reduce reliance on external donors and create resilient, self-sustaining research institutions.

## Conclusion

Transforming research partnerships in Africa requires more than collaboration. Africa must have equity, shared leadership, and lasting institutional capacity building. AREF and its partners are well-positioned to champion these efforts. By expanding impactful programmes, advocating for policy reforms, and fostering inclusive research ecosystems, they are laying the groundwork for a future where African-led research thrives and shapes global solutions. With sustained commitment, research partnerships can shift from dependency to true collaboration, helping African scientists and institutions be pioneers in tackling the continent's most urgent health challenges.

## References

---

- Igwaran, A. and Edoamodu, C. E. (2021). Bibliometric analysis on tuberculosis and tuberculosis-related research trends in Africa: a decade-long study. *Antibiotics*, 10(4), 423. <https://doi.org/10.3390/antibiotics10040423>
- Maina, M. B., Ahmad, U., Arrashid, I. H., Hamidu, S. K., Nasr, F. E., Salihi, A. T., ... & Baden, T. (2021). Two decades of neuroscience publication trends in Africa. *Nature Communications*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-23784-8>
- Molosi-France, K. and Makoni, S. (2020). A partnership of un-equals: global south–north research collaborations in higher education institutions. *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, 8(2), 9-24. <https://doi.org/10.26806/modafr.v8i2.343>
- Okunoye, O., Zewde, Y. Z., Azar, J., Ayele, B. A., Dindayal, S., Moustafa, A., ... & Rizig, M. (2023). The state of play of Parkinson's disease in Africa: a systematic review and point of view. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2023.07.07.23292392>