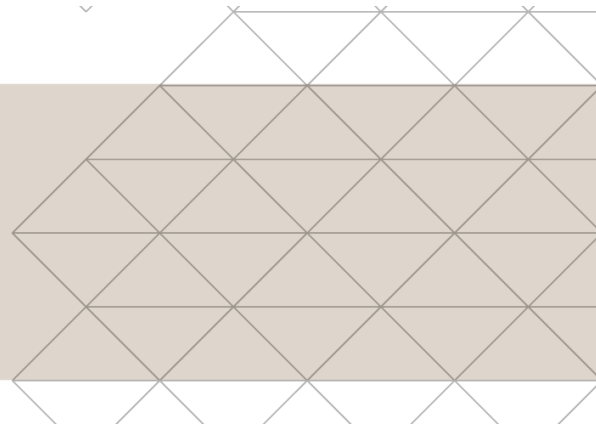




**AFRICAN COLLABORATIVE  
FOR HEALTH FINANCING  
SOLUTIONS**



# **Implementing a Regional Learning Loop to Improve Processes to Achieve Universal Health Coverage in Sub-Saharan Africa**

## ***Lessons Learned***

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# Abbreviations

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- ACS** African Collaborative for Health Financing Solutions
- UHC** Universal Health Coverage

# Introduction

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The African Collaborative for Health Financing Solutions (ACS) has supported African countries' efforts to advance universal health coverage (UHC). One of the key strategies adopted by the project was to build national UHC stakeholders' capacity to autonomously identify bottlenecks in the process to achieve UHC and adopt evidence-based solutions in a consensual manner. A key focus of this strategy was to facilitate connections and knowledge exchange between countries on high-priority UHC-related topics. To implement this axis, ACS supported a regional learning loop between three West African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo.

This report presents the process that ACS followed to implement this learning loop, the challenges met, the lessons learned, as well as recommendations to increase the efficacy of such learning loops. ACS used the following methodological approach to produce this report. It reviewed conceptual documents that formed the basis for regional learning, including reports of various consultations within countries. ACS also collected information through self-administered questionnaires using Google Forms and individual interviews with selected actors who had been involved in designing and implementing the learning loop or involved in facilitating the process.

## Background and rationale

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Since the advent of the Sustainable Development Goals, UHC has become a flagship objective pursued by United Nations member nations. The World Health Organization defines UHC as “*a situation in which all people and communities receive the health services they need without facing financial hardship.*” [1] Achieving UHC in all countries has been enshrined as one of the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 3 (target 3.8). [2]

Countries in sub-Saharan Africa are not on the sidelines of efforts to achieve UHC by 2030. Most of these countries have developed or implemented several policies and strategies to advance UHC, especially over the past decade. While it is possible to improve this effort through a system of national learning, this can also be done through continuous learning between different countries with similar contexts. Indeed, “*in the absence of learning, organizations – and individuals – are simply repeating old practices. Changes remain superficial and improvements are either fortuitous or ephemeral.*” [3] The potential to advance UHC by sharing learning between countries led to ACS's vision of establishing a cross-country learning crucible in Francophone West Africa. The implementation of this vision has received technical support and facilitation from ACS and Health Systems Strengthening Accelerator and their partners.

The primary reason for establishing this learning loop was to meet the need for sharing between the countries involved. Despite the uniqueness of UHC processes in each of these countries, they had similar contexts in several respects, had similar objectives, and developed some common strategies. In addition, these countries had different levels of progress on technical matters. Each country could therefore share its successes, failures, and challenges, as well as the solutions they had implemented so that other countries could learn from them. Another reason for this learning loop was that it offered the opportunity for actors in each country to have a better understanding of UHC concepts. Most actors engaged in the process to achieve UHC with limited or varied levels of understanding. A harmonized understanding of key UHC concepts was therefore needed at both national and regional levels. In addition, in a context of limited resources, countries needed regular updates on evidence-based approaches in order to achieve the three UHC dimensions of population coverage, access to high-quality service, and financial protection [4].

## Learning objectives

The aim of this cross-country learning loop was to provide a space for the exchange of knowledge and experiences around UHC to foster faster and more efficient progress toward UHC. More specifically, this loop aimed to:

- Create a network for exchanges and interactions between actors in the countries involved.
- Strengthen the learning dynamics existing in each of the countries involved.
- Promote the continuous updating of stakeholders' knowledge on key UHC concepts.
- Learn from others' experiences on how to overcome challenges in the march toward UHC.

## Conceptualization

ACS conceptualized this learning loop through consultations of some stakeholders involved in UHC policy dialogues in sub-Saharan Africa. Following these consultations, ACS organized the implementation of the learning loop into six main stages, as shown in Figure 1 below. The next subsections describe each of these stages, as well as how they were implemented. To learn more about the process of developing the learning loop concept, please see this [document](#).

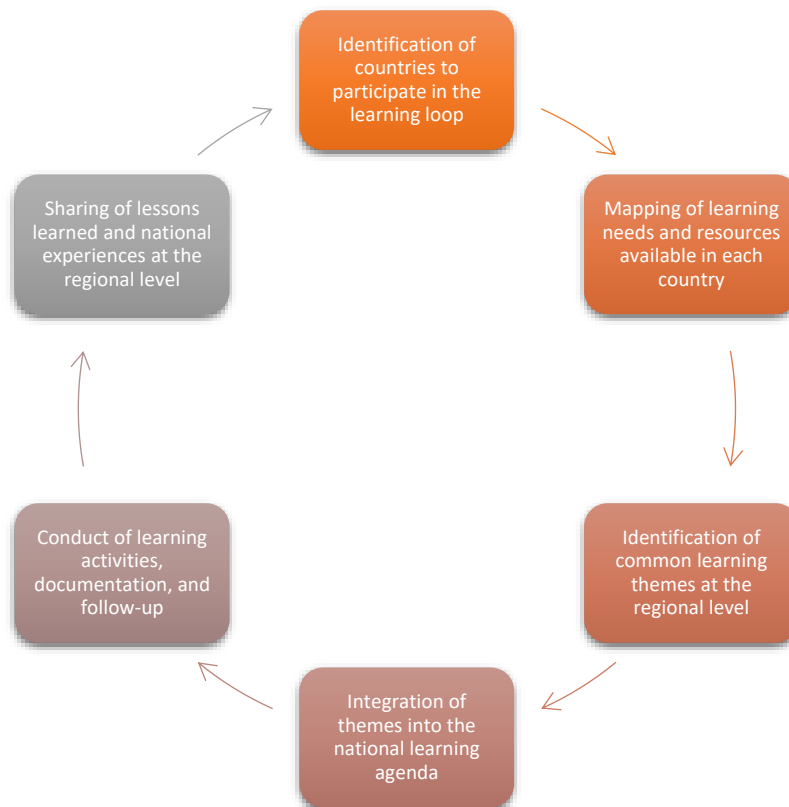


Figure 1: Stages of implementation of the cross-country learning loop.

## Implementation

### Identification of countries to participate in the learning loop

The facilitation team focused its support on a first loop with countries in Francophone West Africa. To be included in the loop, countries must have expressed a keen interest in collaborative learning as well as exhibited the dynamics to continuously learn from their UHC processes, as evidenced by the existence of a national learning agenda or a commitment to develop it. Therefore, investigation and consultation processes should have been set up in the countries. At the end of this step, ACS selected three countries—namely, Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo.

Each of these countries set up a six- to eight-member learning group which engaged policymakers, health care providers, health district managers, civil society members, etc. These groups would be responsible for conducting learning activities under this loop, with the support of other actors involved in the process to achieve UHC in the groups' respective countries. Members of these groups would represent their countries in regional exchanges.

## Mapping of learning needs and resources available

For this first loop, ACS chose the governance of UHC processes as the main learning topic around which learning themes would be developed. ACS chose this topic in agreement with the actors in the three countries involved. ACS used the Heaven and Hell Program Theory<sup>1</sup> as a framework to structure reflections. It is a governance-focused framework for analyzing the dynamics of progress toward UHC (see Figure 2). Based in this framework, ACS identified potential learning themes, namely:

- Methods to gain better knowledge of actors involved in efforts to achieve UHC.
- Approaches to improve the UHC system architecture (e.g., process setup, links between actors, crucible of meetings).
- Approaches to improve laws and regulations.
- Approaches to improve stakeholder voice and participation.
- Approaches to improve the production, access, and use of information and intelligence.
- Approaches to improve accountability.
- Approaches to build a good culture of accountability.

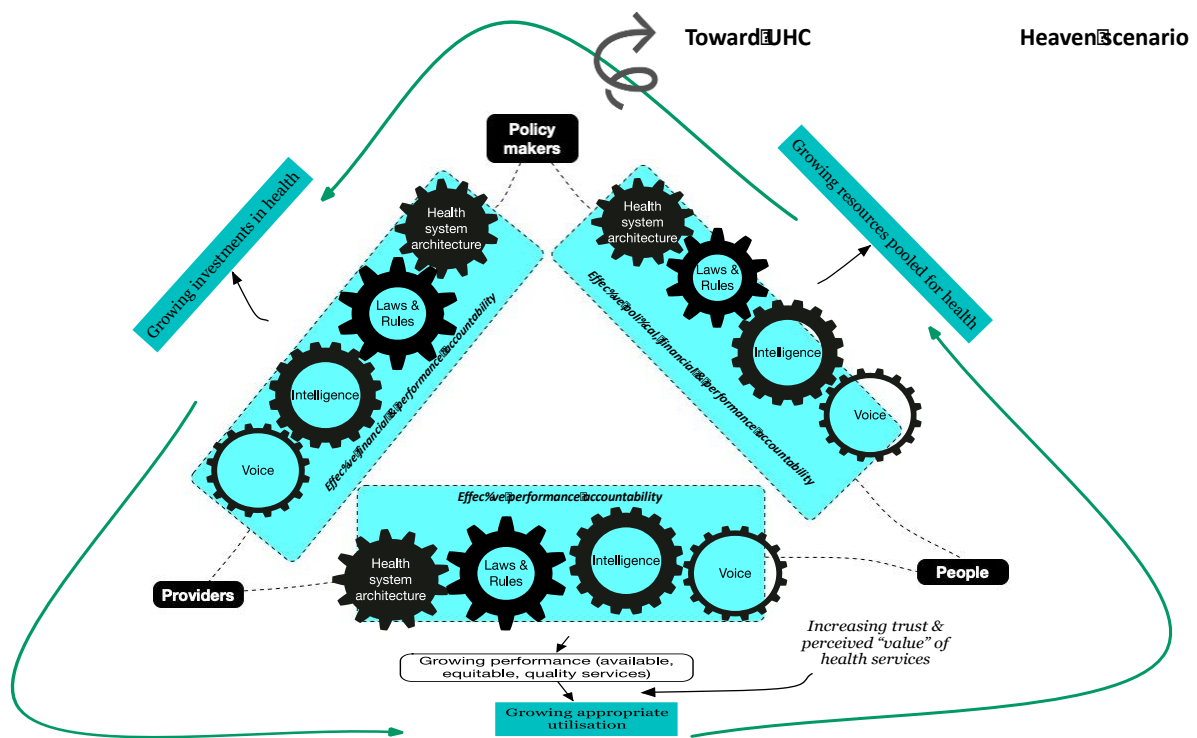


Figure 2: The Heaven and Hell Program Theory (Heavenly Scenario)

Under these key learning themes, each country identified and prioritized where it had learning needs as well as resources (knowledge and experiences) to share with other countries. Table I summarizes the themes that each country selected.

<sup>1</sup> More information on the Heaven and Hell Program Theory can be found [here](#).

**Table 1: High-priority themes for intercountry learning.**

Country	Themes for which the country has learning needs	Themes for which the country has resources to share
<b>Benin</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Approaches to improve the production, access, and use of information and intelligence.</li> <li>- Approaches to improve accountability in UHC processes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Methods to gain better knowledge of actors involved in efforts to achieve UHC.</li> <li>- Approaches to improve laws and regulations.</li> </ul>
<b>Togo</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Approaches to improve the UHC system architecture (e.g., process setup, links between actors, crucible of meetings).</li> <li>- Approaches to improve the production, access, and use of information and intelligence</li> <li>- Approaches to improve accountability.</li> <li>- Approaches to improve stakeholder voice and participation.</li> </ul>	
<b>Burkina Faso</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Methods to gain better knowledge of actors involved in efforts to achieve UHC.</li> <li>- Approaches to improve the UHC system architecture (e.g., process setup, links between actors, crucible of meetings).</li> <li>- Mechanism to improve accountability.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Approaches to improve the production, access, and use of information and intelligence.</li> <li>- Approaches to target vulnerable for equitable UHC policies.</li> </ul>

### Identification of common learning themes

This stage took place during a regional exchange workshop attended by members of the learning groups from Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo, as well as by members of the facilitation team. The objectives of this workshop were to: (1) align understandings with the concept of the regional learning loop; (2) bring together the learning loop countries; (3) identify the themes around which the three countries will carry out learning activities; and (4) define the modalities of future regional interactions.

During this workshop, the participants reviewed the concept, foundations, and principles of the learning loop. Following this, they identified themes common to the three countries based on the prioritization performed at the previous stage —namely, approaches to improve the UHC system architecture and approaches to improve accountability in UHC processes. This workshop also made it possible to identify a need for punctual learning on effective targeting policies aimed at a specific group of beneficiaries (e.g., the extreme poor). Benin and Burkina Faso expressed their willingness to support Togo in an activity on this specific theme. The full report of this workshop is available through this [link](#).

### Integration of themes into the national learning agenda

The learning groups reported the results of the first regional exchange to other UHC actors in their respective countries. They then carried out actions to develop or adapt their national learning agenda, taking into account the shared themes selected at the regional level. More specifically, the participants identified and planned specific activities around these themes in order to fill their knowledge gaps and then integrate them into their national learning agenda.

The learning loop countries have made different progress and had several difficulties in accomplishing these tasks. In Benin, the learning group discussed and followed up on the regional workshop results with the consultative committee on the health insurance component of the Insurance for Human Capital Strengthening project (AM-ARCH). This consultative committee serves as a UHC policy dialogue platform and is the guarantor of any decision on the learning agenda already available. However, given the country’s various priorities, the consultative committee has not yet discussed

adapting their learning agenda. The consultative committee promised to discuss this at their next meeting in February 2022.

The situation has been different in Burkina Faso. The country, which does not yet have a learning agenda for UHC, has resolved to establish a road map for the development of this agenda that would integrate issues of regional interest. However, due to the limited availability of the learning group leaders, this road map has yet to be developed.

As far as Togo is concerned, it has begun to develop a learning agenda for UHC. A workshop dedicated to this task is underway and regional learning issues are being taken into account in the learning agenda being developed. However, Togo has yet to prioritize learning topics and define activities. Due to the availability of national actors, this process has yet to be completed; therefore, Togo has not yet implemented the regional recommendations.

## Conducting learning activities and sharing of lessons learned

This step could not be implemented yet due to the difficulties and the delay experienced in developing or adapting the learning agendas during the previous stage. However, the facilitation team continues to provide technical support and monitor the learning groups in each country before moving forward in this process.

## Challenges faced

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The actors interviewed as part of the implementation of this learning loop have faced several challenges, which we outline below.

### Weak articulation of incentives for participants

Country participants' engagement was not optimal throughout the process, although they all expressed keen interest early in the process. This could be related to their poor understanding of the individual and/or organizational benefits of the learning loop. Moreover, not all actors were convinced of the effectiveness of learning in improving policy implementation.

As the participants in the learning groups already were involved in other activities at their country level, they had significant workload and very limited availability. In addition, conflicting activities in the national agenda limited their availability to participate in regional activities.

### Limited interactivity of virtual meetings

Learning group participants perceived that online meetings did not promote the smooth running of intercountry learning activities, in the sense that it limited interaction time among participants compared with face-to-face events that allow participants to be much more expressive. The virtual format was less conducive to the adequate appropriation of concepts and negatively affected the quality of exchanges.

### Limited capacity for developing learning agenda

According to some actors, the process of identifying learning themes was complex. Indeed, due to the diversity of the actors involved, it was sometimes difficult to reach consensus on the issues to retain in learning agendas, as well as on their prioritization. In some situations, power imbalances weighed on the choice of high-priority learning themes and may have lowered the enthusiasm of participants who were not involved in decision-making. Finally, the Burkina Faso and Togo learning groups admitted that they were not fully capacitated, because the learning processes around UHC were not yet very developed at in their country. These countries did not yet have a learning agenda around UHC, which slowed down the regional process.



## Lessons learned

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Several lessons emerged from the process of creating and implementing this transnational learning loop. We present the most salient ones below.

### Align understanding

Lack of understanding of various regional learning concepts was a cause of participants' lack of commitment and ineffectiveness of actions they undertook. Organizers and facilitators of cross-country learnings should make deliberate efforts to enable participants to understand the various stages of the loop, their objectives and content, and the actors' roles at each of these stages. In addition, organizers and facilitators of learning loops should clearly explain the differences between a long-term cross-country learning process and one-off knowledge-sharing activities.

### Clearly communicate the benefits of learning

The success of cross-country learning depends on participants having clear understanding of the expected benefits. As such, it is necessary to specify the learning loop's potential to improve the actors' performance at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels. It may be useful to intentionally communicate the way in which socialization and confrontation of their respective experiences allow participants to improve their knowledge and behavior and therefore their professional practices. Thus, cross-country exchange participants' acquisition of new knowledge would impact the performance of their organizations.

### Ensure deep understanding of country dynamics

To succeed in regional learning, it is important to master the contextual factors of the countries involved. Organizers and facilitators of transnational learning must first seek to fully understand the current power dynamics and stakeholders' dynamics in the countries, as well as their priorities in terms of UHC. Understanding the political and social context also facilitates interactions with the country's actors.

### Include stakeholders at all levels of the health system

The implementation of this loop showed that active involvement of national actors at all levels of the health system, particularly those at the operational level, throughout the development process is an important success factor. Indeed, promoting the involvement of operational actors, in addition to policymakers, fosters commitment and rapid progress. The inclusion of these different stakeholders ensures that the themes addressed take into account the needs of various actors who contribute to the functioning and performance of the health system.

### Ensure flexibility and adaptability of learning themes

Despite the fact that countries in the same region may have similar UHC challenges and objectives, they are at different levels and paces in developing and implementing their UHC strategies due to various factors (e.g., political, economic, technical, or security factors). As a result, their learning needs and priorities are different and common interests can be hard to come by. Therefore, the development and implementation of the learning loop should be flexible in order to identify emerging knowledge gaps and surface the most recent and solid knowledge to help national actors choose those that best suit their realities.

### Assert national ownership and clarify the role of the technical assistance

To succeed in the learning loop, it is essential to seek formal support from the political and administrative authorities of each country from the beginning of the process. Moreover, the loop

should not be seen as an initiative of the technical assistance providers. Technical assistance providers' role must be clearly limited to supporting national participants, who should lead the initiative; this role must be understood by all actors upstream of the learning process. Technical support includes, in particular, the empowerment of national actors and the facilitation of the process and interactions between actors both within each country and between countries. These empowerment and facilitation functions are decisive for the sustainability of the cross-country learning system.

## Conclusion and recommendations

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Learning loops are collaborative learning mechanisms involving countries with similar goals and challenges. They are beneficial for fostering rapid progress toward UHC by enabling countries to learn from the mistakes and successes of other countries and to benefit from their skills. There are multiple challenges to implementation, including maintaining the commitment of stakeholders in a context of multiple and diverse priorities. It is important to embed the learning process in existing institutional arrangements to ensure its sustainability.

Some recommendations emerged from ACS's discussions with key stakeholders, namely:

- Carefully match the countries to involve in the process (i.e., match countries with more or less similar contexts).
- Ensure countries are well equipped to develop their national learning agendas before implementing learning loops.
- Ensure that the choice of learning themes does not suffer from a power imbalance among learning loop participants and their prioritization really reflects the needs of participants.
- Establish a communication mechanism for in-depth interactions between the facilitation team and country actors.
- Obtain support from the authorities involved in UHC to assert national leadership over the process.
- Identify institutional opportunities to provide incentives for appropriate and ongoing engagement.
- Review the planning of cross-country meetings by taking into account the evolution of each country and the availability of actors; a semiannual periodicity was proposed.
- Reconcile virtual and face-to-face meetings for cross-country exchanges. Alternate face-to-face and virtual meetings to have at least one face-to-face meeting per year.

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