


REDUCING NIGERIA'S CANCER BURDEN: A Policy Brief



This policy brief is informed by the webinar launch of Aspire Coronation Trust (ACT) Foundation's report on the Landscape Study of NGO-led Cancer Interventions in Nigeria. It integrates key messages from expert speakers across the cancer control spectrum at the report launch.

Background

For many people, cancer is seen as a death sentence. It becomes a crisis point in the lives of both the family members and the individual who has been diagnosed with cancer, representing a huge challenge on an emotional, financial, and physical level. Cancer accounts for about 1 in every 6 deaths worldwide - more than HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined¹. According to estimates from the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2019, cancer is the first or second leading cause of death before the age of 70 years in 112 of 183 countries². The cancer burden is an increasing problem in Africa, with more than 1 million estimated new cancer cases in 2020³. Global research estimates that by 2030 there will be a 70% increase in the number of cancer cases in Africa and this is due to population growth, aging, and lifestyle issues.⁴ In Nigeria alone, an estimated 78,000 cancer deaths occurred in 2020 with nearly 125,000 new cases.³ Figure 1 shows the top 5 cancer types for estimated cases in Nigeria for men and women combined. Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer (22.7% of total cases), closely followed by prostate (12.3%), cervical (9.7%), colorectal (6%) and non-hodgkin lymphoma (5.9%) cancers.

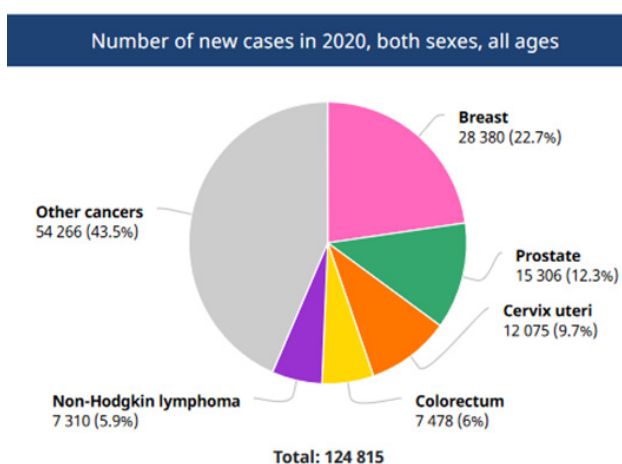


Figure 1: Distribution of Cases for the Top 5 Most Common Cancers in Nigeria for Both Men and Women. Source: GLOBOCAN 2020

The cancer burden in Nigeria is very high and presents colossal challenges across the spectrum. First and foremost is the prevalence of late presentation. Cancer care in Nigeria is largely characterised by late-stage presentation after first symptom and delayed diagnosis. Studies have shown that over 70% of patients present late at advanced stages III and IV.⁵ Delayed presentation contributes to huge costs of treatment which amounts to the challenge of healthcare affordability. Unfortunately, the insufficient budgetary allocation in Nigeria to healthcare continues to affect capital expenditure and access to essential health services.⁶ In 2018, it is estimated that over 75% of total health expenditures are covered by out-of-pocket payments in Nigeria.⁷ The inadequate capital budget on healthcare is unsurprisingly evidenced by the paucity of infrastructure for cancer care and control. There is a severe shortage of diagnostics, surgery, radiotherapy, and chemotherapy equipment integral to the management of cancer. While radiotherapy is a critical component of the curative management of many cancers worldwide, the International Atomic Energy Agency reports that the biggest gap between radiotherapy availability and need is in Nigeria.⁸ Furthermore, the limited number of specialists poses a serious barrier to cancer care and control. Poor outcomes persist as there are less than 100 radiation consultants and clinical oncologists in Nigeria.⁹

While the intricacies of the growing cancer problem in Nigeria are overwhelming, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are nonetheless spearheading interventions around the prevention and early detection components of control. They are the champions of

increased awareness and drivers of mass screening services across the country. Their commitment and consistency hold the power to greater breakthrough when armed with the combined forces and resources of public and private sectors. In a bid to advocate for greater collective support for NGOs at the frontline of combating the cancer crisis, Aspire Coronation Trust (ACT) Foundation conducted a landscape studyⁱ to understand: the challenges that they face, the barriers they have to overcome, and the critical gaps/needs that require resources. The research findings reported interwoven challenges across several issues: logistics, culture, health facilities barriers, system-level barriers, and the limitations of financial and human resources. In addition, this landscape analysis of cancer NGOs further reveals the need for multi-sectoral and multidisciplinary action to strategically address the complexities of the cancer problem in Nigeria.

It is within this context that ACT Foundation held a webinar to launch the report of its study on the Landscape of NGO-led Cancer Interventions in Nigeria and provide a platform for policy discussions and recommendations on transforming the cancer landscape in the country. The webinar themed, '*Opportunities for Multistakeholder Approach to Cancer Control in Nigeria*', took place online on the 11th of November 2021. The event convened distinguished stakeholders and thought leaders in public health and cancer control. Ms. Osayi Alile, CEO, ACT Foundation, opened the event, and immediately, the urgency and importance of the ensuing discussions became clear.

i. The Landscape Study of NGO-led Cancer Interventions in Nigeria is available at: https://actrustfoundation.org/html_main/images/portfolio/pdf/Landscape_Study.pdf

Increased commitments and partnerships that extend beyond sectors are needed to significantly reduce Nigeria's cancer burden. The keynote address was delivered by Mrs. Clare Omatseye, Managing Director, JNC International and President, West Africa Healthcare Federation. In her presentation, Mrs. Omatseye highlighted the importance of strategic collaborations in changing Nigeria's cancer challenges into opportunities for better health outcomes. Considering the challenges around late presentation, infrastructure, cost of healthcare, and the limited number of specialists, she called for transformational thinking that will enable continuous innovation and sustain change. She concluded with a deep dive into innovative examples of supply-side financing models (featured in the policy recommendation section) that can be adopted to fund and transform the landscape for oncology management and care.

The webinar also featured a plenary session moderated by Mrs. Ndifreke Okwuegbunam, Director, Programs and Grants, ACT Foundation, with panelists including Dr. Ifeanyi Nsofor, Senior Vice President for Africa, Human Health Education and Research Foundation (HHERF); Dr. Adamu Al-hassan Umar, President/CEO, Nigerian Cancer Society and Dr. Amaka Lasebikan, President, Association of Radiation and Clinical Oncologist of Nigeria (ARCON). In attendance were over 80 participants drawn from civil society organizations, healthcare, private sector, academia, philanthropy, cancer survivors, and representatives from government agencies.

The panellists discussed issues surrounding the Nigeria cancer burden: prevention, vaccination, National Cancer Control Plan (2018 - 2022), cancer control financing, and health systems strengthening. The consensus is that while we

made progress in addressing the cancer crisis in the country, a lot more work is required to greatly reduce the burden of the disease. One of the major highlights of the discourse is the matter of leveraging the existing resources and platforms necessitated by COVID-19 to tackle cancer with the urgency and priority it deserves.

Policy Recommendations

Multistakeholder collaborations and partnerships amongst government, private, and social sector players have the potential power to break down the barriers that exist across the care continuum and change the trajectory of cancer in the country. Thus, this section presents recommendations for the government, private sector, and civil society on how to close the care gap.

Government

» **Coordinate population-based screening programmes.**

The Government should plan, design, and implement population-based screening programmes for the types of cancer amenable to early detection. The National Cancer Control Plan (NCCP) identified for screening, four eligible cancers that are of public health importance: breast, cervical, prostate & colorectal cancers. The screening programmes should be based on clear evidence of effectiveness and anchored by a robust monitoring and evaluation system of implementation.

» **Leverage the machinery of COVID-19 management to boost cancer prevention efforts.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated

new norms and trends in healthcare as individuals and institutions fight to contain the spread of infections. New levels of acceptance and the practice of self-care emerged as communities adopted preventive measures against COVID-19. Also, the COVID-19 response necessitated an expanded health surveillance system that incorporated mobile technologies. The Government should harness the momentum of the public spirit and measures taken against COVID-19 to consolidate cancer control efforts. This approach holds significant opportunities for integration into longer-term trends towards mass awareness of cancer, increased self-care, population-based screening and vaccination uptake, digital health, and telemedicine.

» **Promote and increase cancer awareness through mainstream and new media.**

The impact of strategic communication on cancer at the federal, state, and local levels to promote widespread awareness cannot be overemphasized. Increased self-care, help-seeking, early presentation, early detection, reduced stigma, general health promotion, risk reduction of other significant chronic diseases to mention but a few, constitute the long-term benefits of nationwide cancer awareness campaigns. Nigeria's cancer burden must be given the attention it deserves on mainstream and social media. The government should initiate and sustain targeted informal education campaigns to build knowledge on the priority cancers, warning signs and symptoms, risk factors, and healthy lifestyle habits. Furthermore, for effective communication, messaging should be based on evidence and localized to context.

» **Provide nationwide health insurance package to cover cancer screening.**

While the multistakeholder-led provision of a cancer treatment fund is highly com-

mendable, access to health services is critical and represents a foundational investment in saving lives. Cancer presents tremendous financial, emotional, and economic burden and urgently requires a national health insurance package to cover, at the least, cancer screening. Individuals with little or no financial risk protection are significantly less likely to utilize cancer screening services as the cost can be prohibitive. Reduced incidence and mortality, enhanced health-seeking, and improved health outcomes are some of the substantial benefits of insurance coverage for cancer screening. In alignment with the principles of Universal Health Coverage (UHC), the government at all levels must take the bold step and extend cancer screening insurance package to the populace.

» **Prioritize HPV vaccination of adolescent girls against cervical cancer.**

HPV vaccination as a primary, evidence-based prevention of cervical cancer, offers the most effective long-term intervention of reducing the risk of incidence and mortality. The Nigeria government must heed the global call to action on eliminating cervical cancer and show the political will to provide adolescent girls with vaccination against the human papillomavirus (HPV). A demonstrated commitment to addressing the high burden of cervical cancer by our political actors will attract the required multisectoral collaboration and investments from local and international partners needed to implement large-scale vaccination programmes across the country. Furthermore, the government should leverage the experiences and structures of NGOs-trusted community voices, for strategic communication to tackle cultural, or societal barriers that may affect acceptance and uptake of the vaccine.

» **Establish evidence-based cancer survivorship care programmes.**

Cancer treatment can have life-altering effects, including physical, psychosocial, social, and financial, on patients and their families. The government should set up evidence-based survivorship care programmes that can empower patients to realise their best possible health outcomes and support their assimilation back into society and the workforce. The role of survivors in the continuum of cancer care can have a significant impact in advancing the future of prevention and control. With comprehensive support from the government, cancer survivors can serve as advocates for community education and addressing the problem of stigmatization. Their voices are a powerful tool in advocating for improvements in policy, practice, patient-centred care, and in empowering others to share their stories.

» **Establish a reporting system for the National Cancer Control Plan.**

The National Cancer Control Program of the Federal Ministry of Health provides leadership and direction to the continuum of care, with oversight on the implementation of the control plan. Therefore, the role of the NCCP must be strengthened to enable and assure significant reduction in Nigeria's cancer burden and ensure that the priority areas are aligned with desired outcomes. Periodic reviews through a consultation process with stakeholders and key interest groups are fundamental to strengthening governance and accountability.

» **Design knowledge transfer programmes to build the capacity of health-care professionals.**

The implementation of the cancer control policy requires adequate and highly trained health and social care professionals.

Strategic investments for the training and retention of healthcare professionals that work across cancer services are thus critical in addressing the current workforce deficits. Through global and adaptable partnerships, the government should develop specialized oncology diploma courses at the tertiary level, establish fellowship programmes for oncology professionals, and provide certified subspecialty training for general practitioners. Furthermore, regular training should be prioritized for primary healthcare workers to highly improve the index of suspicion.

» **Increase investments in infrastructure, technology, and the cancer registry system.**

A comprehensive oncology care management will require substantial and sustainable investments in infrastructure, technology, and the cancer registry system. The government should commit to critical investments in cancer facilities and equipment (diagnostics, radiotherapy treatment centres, etc.) as well as the appropriate technology. The national cancer registry system plays an important role in cancer control thus, the government should secure a pipeline of sustainable funding to ensure high functionality of the available registries.

» **Initiate sustainable supply-side financing models to achieve cancer control targets.**

Large-scale mobilization of sustainable financial resources is critical to the implementation of the cancer policy. The private sector's unprecedented role in response to COVID-19 revealed that the cancer control financing challenges can be considerably mitigated if Nigeria's urgent cancer burden is given commensurate attention as COVID-19. The government must utilize its convening power to forge multistakeholder collabo-

rations between the private sectors, and secure the financial resources needed to achieve the cancer control targets. Recommended initiatives for supply-side financing include:

- **Domestic Resource Mobilization for a cancer care developmental fund:** High Net worth Individuals; private companies should be encouraged to devote a portion of their CSR funds to the cancer fund.
- **Domestic Resource Mobilization via Luxury (SIN) Taxes to a Catastrophic Health Fund (CHF).**

- **Telco's, FGN & FIRS** E.g.: 1% of every phone top-up is set aside for Cancer/healthcare
- **Smoking Tax** - 5% is dedicated to cancer management & care
- **Alcohol and Sugary drinks Consumption Tax** - 1% consumption tax to healthcare (35% to cancer management & care)

- **Banking Management Fee** - 1% to a Catastrophic Health Fund, with 50% used for Cancer Prevention & Treatment

Private Sector

» **Establish a private sector-led partnership fund to support cancer control projects.**

The Private Sector Coalition against COVID-19 (CACOVID) played a significant role in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, mobilizing crucial resources towards supporting the government's response to the crisis. This approach can be adopted to combat Nigeria's cancer crisis. The private sector should come together and pursue a common vision to reduce the

country's cancer burden. A partnership fund should be forged to finance capital-intensive cancer control projects.

» **Increase support and collaboration with NGOs.**

The private sector can play a more prominent role in supporting NGOs at the front line of combating the cancer crisis in Nigeria. Private sector organizations should encourage NGO-led cancer intervention programmes (awareness and advocacy, screening, etc.) with funding, technical, and operational support. NGOs are often constrained by resources and increased collaboration from private sector players will further increase corporate participation in cancer control programmes.

» **Promote cancer prevention and screening in the workplace.**

The private sector has a tremendous opportunity to promote healthy behaviours, including cancer prevention and cancer screening, in the workplace. Employers should provide health insurance coverage for the recommended screenings with supportive policies to encourage uptake.

Furthermore, cancer prevention activities such as physical activity should be incorporated into workplace culture and wellness.

Civil Society

» **Intensify joint action for high-level advocacy.**

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) play an incredibly important role in facilitating action towards a significant reduction in Nigeria's cancer burden. Cancer-based NGOs, coalitions, and interest groups should come together

in decision-making forums to uphold and support the implementation of commitments required to improve health outcomes across the continuum of care. Through strategic joint efforts, civil society is better positioned to maximize its voice and impact in demanding greater action and accountability.

» **Increase collaboration with other CSOs.**

As the major drivers of cancer prevention programmes (community education and free screening) in both urban and rural communities, new and strategic collaborations between CSOs have the potential for greater impact. CSOs should increase their collaborative capacity; share resources, exchange information, and consolidate strengths to amplify their cancer control efforts. Strategic collaboration within CSOs will increase the visibility of cancer awareness programmes, prevent duplication of services, spur innovation and attract new and enhanced forms of support.

» **Invest and contribute to open knowledge.**

NGOs collect vast amounts of potentially rich data and have extensive experience implementing cancer intervention programmes across communities. An open platform to exchange data and experiences on cancer control programmes can attract greater attention to their cancer control efforts increase knowledge of effective strategies, expand access to critical information, and strengthen sector collaboration. Civil society should invest in creating an open knowledge platform and contribute to sharing relevant data, stories, and lessons.

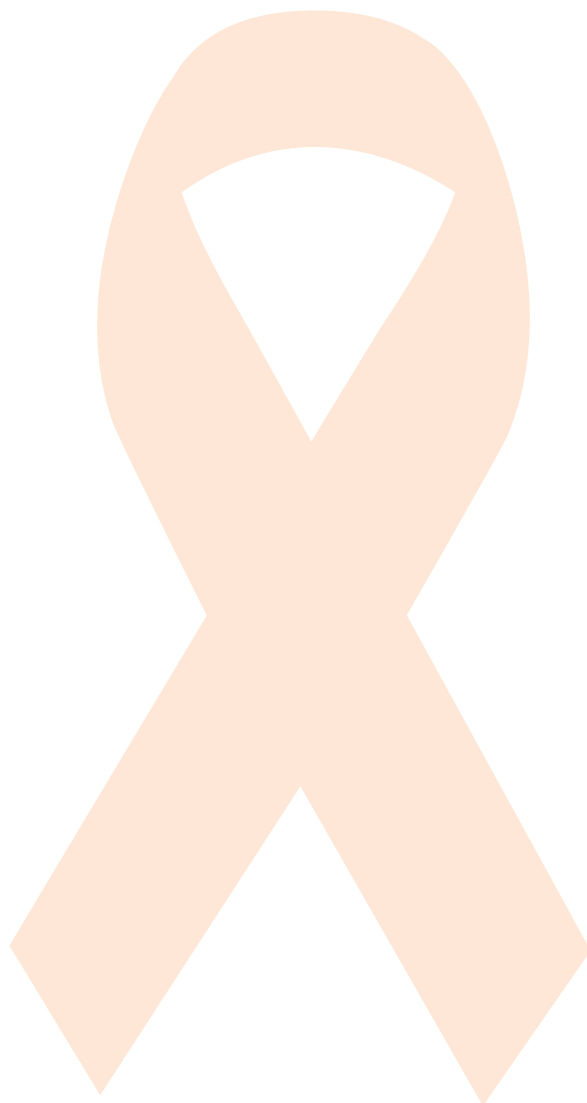
Conclusion

Nigeria's cancer crisis deserves a response that is driven by science, data, and public health. The government cannot solve this crisis alone. Full implementation of the cancer control plan will require sustained, coordinated, and complementary efforts of the populace, the private sector, healthcare providers, academia, development partners, professional associations, multilateral and bilateral entities, donors, and civil society.

Cross-sectoral partnerships can facilitate the large-scale mobilization of resources urgently required for the effective implementation of nationwide cancer control programmes. Furthermore, a country-led multistakeholder collaboration can attract expertise from the international community and facilitate the building of local expertise. Ultimately, this approach will produce innovation, sustainability, and accountability - critical ingredients in tackling the intricate nature of the cancer burden in Nigeria.

The National Cancer Control Plan provides a shared vision on which to build collaborative partnerships to significantly reduce the burden of the disease. Now more than ever, multistakeholder collaboration is crucial to consolidate cancer control efforts, record and accelerate progress towards the 2025 World Cancer Declaration.

This policy brief was prepared by Victoria Oletu, Research Associate, ACT Foundation. Kindly direct enquiries to research@actrustfoundation.org.



Endnotes

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