

## Shared priorities make India-Africa health tie-up critical: ICMR chief

India-Africa Health Sciences Meet opens tomorrow

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In an attempt to bring down dependence on the West for expertise on health research, the government is preparing the ground for a partnership with the African continent.

Four different ministries — of Health and Family Welfare, External Affairs, Commerce and Industry, and

Science and Technology — are coming together to conduct the India-Africa Health Sciences Meet.

Speaking to the *BusinessLine* ahead of the event, Soumya Swaminathan, Director-General of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), and Secretary to the Department of Health Research, said this meet, which comes in the wake of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement of a \$10-million India-Africa Health Fund last year, is a step in the direction of more 'South-South' collaborations.

ICMR will be coordinating the meet starting September 1.

"We have common health problems, limited resources and India is probably better developed in terms of its industry and biotech capacity, manufacturing abilities as well as medical care facilities in terms of hospitals and doctors. If we have to invest in research and development (R&D) it would be a win-win in the sense we have common priorities, we can share resources and therefore get more out of it and you can dilute the risks and share the benefits," Swaminathan said.

This meet, she said, was the first step towards sharing infrastructure and human resources in the health sector.

### Similar environment

Swaminathan said that India and African countries have similar disease profile, such as the high incidences of malaria, tuberculosis and HIV, besides maternal and child health issues.

“Further, we share environmental risk factors – such as indoor and outdoor air pollution are both common risk factors. And emerging infections are another common area of concern. Both in India (South-East Asia) and Africa we live very close to animals and birds and emerging zoonotic infectious diseases will be seen in these regions. We have to prepare and plan on how we will deal with those diseases,” she said.

Shared disease profiles, similar environmental challenges, which include outcomes of climate change, make tie-ups between India and other developing countries of the tropical and sub-tropical belt crucial, Swaminathan added. Recently, ICMR had also announced a partnership with Thailand’s Health Intervention and Technology Assessment Program (HITAP), to help India’s Medical Technology Assessment Board , which reviews standards for medicines, vaccines and devices to determine the most cost-effective solutions.

Swaminathan said this is also an example of the advantages of a South-South partnership.

“The reason we went for HITAP is because they have a similar economic situation, similar burden of disease and they have evolved their health system to provide universal health coverage and apply these health tech interventions.”