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Adapting sub-national public health emergency management: the Mbale regional emergency operations center experience in eastern Uganda

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested the capacity for emergency responses in low- and middle- income countries (LMICs), which has highlighted the importance of local public health interventions. Uganda has a robust national response coordination mechanism; however, limited capacities exist at the sub-national level. In 2020, the Uganda Ministry of Health established the Mbale regional emergency operations center (REOC) to coordinate responses to public health and natural disasters in eastern Uganda. The Mbale REOC multidisciplinary regional response team works closely with the Ministry of Health, regional referral hospitals, implementing partners, and academia. We aimed to describe the experience of the Mbale REOC over the 3 years from inception including during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted a qualitative study including a review of key documents and reports, and semi-structured interviews of participants involved in the establishment of the Mbale REOC and subject matter experts. We used a thematic approach and framework analysis using NVivo 12 software to analyze qualitative data. After the establishment of the Mbale REOC, complete daily regional surveillance reporting increased from 43% to 93%. Over 12 months, the REOC conducted on average 15 partner coordination meetings. The REOC supported 16 districts with logistics and inventory management including coordination of material supply transfer between districts. The REOC provided training in laboratory outbreak monitoring and evaluation to 21 regional trainers, 72 district mentors, and 256 facilities. The REOC established a mobile laboratory in the region that reduced COVID-19 PCR sample result turnaround time from ≥ 7 to ≤ 2 days and increased the number of tested samples from 200 to 500 per day. The Mbale REOC improved the sub-national response to infectious diseases outbreaks and disasters in eastern Uganda and was recognized by the Ministry of Health as a model for sub-national public health emergency management. A regional REOC

strategy could be adopted by other LMICs to build local public health emergency response capacity.

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