



Schistosomiasis Early Career Researchers (ECR) Online Café

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Meeting Report

The Schistosomiasis Early Career Researchers Online Café took place on the 27th of July 2023, with over 50 participants joining the online meeting. Dr Derick Osakunor chaired the meeting, introducing the context and purpose of the meeting.

The GSA is a platform and network for the schistosomiasis community, bringing together the different groups and organizations working on schistosomiasis to discuss and problem solve common challenges and to promote and advocate for schistosomiasis research and elimination.

This is done through working groups and meetings, one of which is the GSA Research Working Group (RWG) chaired by Dr Derick Osakunor and Dr Justin Komguel Nono. This group discusses, promotes and highlights research priorities for schistosomiasis. This year the group agreed to focus on Early Career Researchers (ECRs) working on different areas of schistosomiasis and how best to leverage the GSA platform and network to support ECRs develop their work and career progression.

The RWG outline three phases to assist in identifying and developing the GSA offer to ECRs.

- Phase One: to collect information on research interests, challenges and support and skill development needs from early career researchers through an online questionnaire disseminated through the GSA network.
- Phase two: to organise an informal online meeting to discuss challenges and ideas with ECRs and collect suggestions on what the GSA could offer/develop for ECRs
- Phase three: to review the ideas and suggestions from ECRs, and identify 2-3 items that the GSA could take forward, through its communications platform and through ECR led initiatives.

Dr Osakunor gave an overview of the programme for the online café covering:

- Section 1 – Introduction and sharing of questionnaire findings.
- Section 2 - Breakout Discussion Groups
- Section 3 - Summary of ideas and networking opportunity

Section 1: Introduction and sharing of questionnaire findings.

Dr Anouk Gouvras, Director of Communications and Programmes at the GSA presented findings from the GSA's Early Career Researchers questionnaire, co-developed with the GSA Research Working Group to capture insights on challenges faced by ECRs and the support and skills needed to develop research careers. This questionnaire was circulated in English and French to various networks in May, 89 responses to the English survey and 12 responses to the French survey. For career stage the majority of respondents were PhD or other students, and with language preferences (English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Kiswahili), English scored highest, with French second. A few respondents selected French as their only language out of those suggested. With country representation, 23 countries were represented, the majority of respondents from African countries, highest number from Nigeria.

The ECR questionnaire focused on the following questions:

1. What specific topics within your research interests you the most?
2. What topics would you like to discuss during the breakout room sessions?
3. What are the main challenges you have faced as an ECR?
4. What types of support do you think would be most beneficial for ECRs?



GSA

Schistosomiasis Early Career Researchers

The [Global Schistosomiasis Alliance](#) will be hosting an informal online meeting with early careers researchers working on schistosomiasis. This online meeting will be called **The Schistosomiasis Early Career Researchers Online Café**. The purpose of this online café is to discuss ideas of what the GSA could do to support Early Career Researchers (ECR) with ECRs themselves, to identify challenges, discuss potential areas and ideas of support that the GSA could take forward. **This form is the first step in understanding the needs of ECRs. We invite ECRs to fill in this form to help us develop the content, structure and running of this first online café.**

ECR Definition: We recognize that countries use different definitions for ECRs, and that the challenges faced will differ accordingly. **We wish to be as inclusive as possible, therefore we invite anyone who self-identifies as an ECR.** In order to help us structure the online café to capture all definitions and to support discussions for the different definitions we are using this form to assess career stages of all ECRs.

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this form. The information and data you provide will be used by the GSA solely for the purposes of the GSA ECR Online Café. You can request that your data is removed at any time by emailing Anouk Gouvras at anouk.gouvras@eliminateschisto.org

5. Are there any specific skills or experiences you would like to gain as an ECR?

The answers were categorised by theme, counted, and ranked by popularity. The top 5 answers are shown below. Full list of answers shown in Appendix 4 in the online café slide deck.

1. What specific topics within your research interests you the most?

Rank	Research interest	No
1	Epidemiology	32
2	Genital Schistosomiasis	18
3	Implementation (Programmatic) Research	16
4	Molecular /Genetics /Genomics	15
5	Other (other NTDs, disease, AMR etc)	12

2. What topics would you like to discuss during the breakout room sessions?

Rank	Discussion Topics	No
1	Epidemiology	17
2	Implementation research design	18
3	Proposals, Grants and fellowships	13
4	Molecular /Genetics /Genomics	8
5	Diagnosis	7

3. What are the main challenges you have faced as an ECR?

Rank	ECR challenges	No
1	Funding	55
2	Laboratory facilities/materials	11
3	Training and mentorship	11
4	Networking and Collaborations	17
5	Career progression/Opportunities/positions/Job security	6

4. What types of support do you think would be most beneficial for ECRs?

Rank	ECR Support	No
1	Funding (Research and ECR Grants)	63
2	Training (Research design, leadership, Lab, analysis)	32
3	Mentorship	21
4	Networking and Collaborations	19
5	Workshops (Lab/writing/analysis)	10

5. Are there any specific skills or experiences you would like to gain as an ECR?

Rank	ECR Skills	No
1	Molecular and cellular techniques	19
2	Proposal/Grant writing and project development	19
3	Communications and scientific writing skills	15
4	Laboratory and fieldwork training	14
5	Bioinformatics, biostatistics and data analysis skills	13

The findings from the survey were used to structure the online café, in particular the discussion group themes and facilitators that were chosen from the online questionnaire respondents who indicated that they would be willing to act as group facilitators.

Section 2: Breakout Discussion Groups

Dr Derick Osakunor introduced the breakout discussion groups. The purpose of the breakout group discussions is to bring together early career researchers attending the online café to discuss their experiences, their needs, and their ideas with regards to skills and career development and how the GSA platform and network can be used to facilitate and enable early career researchers working in schistosomiasis. The breakout discussion groups are themed using the research interested and discussions topics highlighted in the ECR questionnaire. The themes were wide-ranging to capture the diversity and range of disciplines and stages, so that researchers can benefit from each other's experience and knowledge and to enable open discussion about what researchers have found, and might find, useful in their skills and career development. Dr Osakunor introduced the facilitators for each group.

1. **Epidemiology, Burden and Unmet Need** (English with French interpretation)
 - a. Facilitators: Janet Masaku (Kenya Medical Research Institute) and Adam Cieplinski (Natural History Museum, London)

2. **Implementation Research, Diagnostics, Drug Discovery, Vaccines**
 - a. Facilitators: Ilemobayo Victor Fasogbon (Kampala International University) and David Woutouoba Ntieche (Université de Yaoundé 1)
3. **Molecular Research and Immunology**
 - a. Facilitators: Anna Kildemoes (Statens Serum Institut) and Chiaka Anumudu (University of Ibadan)
4. **Recherche moléculaire et immunologie** (French discussion group)
 - a. Facilitators: Patience Muika (Democratic Republic of the Congo) and Edmond Loic Mengoue (University of Dschang)
5. **Environmental/Social Factors, and Behaviour Change**
 - a. Facilitators: Philip Leakey Odida (SWAP) and Simon Odoemene (Adeleke University Ede)

Participants in each discussion group were asked to:

- Share experiences of pursuing research in their area - what were some of the challenges.
- Discuss what have they found useful in their career development, and share examples from their institute/network/experience.
- Identify key actions that would be most useful for the GSA to do to support Early Career Researchers working in schistosomiasis?

To assist in capturing the discussion points each group had an online JamBoard where they could add their key points using online post it notes. Key actions and suggestions for the GSA to take forward to support ECRs were collected and categorised by theme summarised in Appendix 1. Screenshots of the full JamBoards are available in Appendix 2.

Section 3: Summary of ideas and networking opportunity

Dr Derick Osakunor invited the facilitator from each discussion group to share key points from their discussions. These are summarised below.

List of ECR Challenges:

1. Finding funding
2. Lack of networking opportunities
3. Lack of training especially molecular and statistics/bioinformatics
4. Lack of access to resources and facilities/infrastructure
5. Monopoly of knowledge and lack of knowledge/methodology sharing
6. Access to samples/lack of biobanks
7. Lack of consistent, long-term funding to finish projects.

8. Finding platforms/networks that facilitate exchange of knowledge, especially methodology and SOPs

List of what would be useful to ECRs:

1. Mentoring
2. Training on molecular and statistics
3. Networking opportunities and exchanging ideas
4. Sharing info on accessible biobanks, e.g. through FIND's online biobank
5. Advocacy from researchers and GSA to private organisations etc that may be interested in diagnostics, drugs and vaccine developments.
6. Meetings and courses for knowledge exchange on methodologies etc – sharing info when these meetings/courses are announced.
7. Cloud computing support
8. Publication fees support

Suggestions on key actions for the GSA to take forward to support ECRs are shown in Appendix 1. These were categorised and counted. The counts are shown in the table below, the detail of these suggestions on actions are very helpful to plan the next steps for the GSA.

Key Actions for the GSA to take forward.

Action theme	Count
Networking and CoP	10
Comms listings	8
Training	7
Collaboration	6
Advocacy	4
Visibility	3
Funding	2
Mentoring	2

There is a keen interest in networking and community of practice, i.e., peer support systems. Discussions brought up some useful ideas on types of platforms that could be used for peer-to-peer support and types of events for networking and methodology/knowledge exchange discussions. The next top interest is listings/repository of different available resources, from grants and funding to listing different types of training. Thirdly there's a request for GSA to organise workshops and training sessions directly.



These are some of the suggestions that will be presented to the GSA RWG and the GSA Exec Team to determine next steps and potential initiatives for the GSA to take forward.

The GSA and chairs of the GSA RWG would like to express their thanks to the RWG members who guided the development of this online café, the facilitators who led discussions and reported on actions identified, and all the participants who engaged with discussions and shared their thoughts and experiences.



Appendix 1 List of suggested actions – categorised by theme.

Action ideas	Theme	Action category
GSA / other networks to support overcoming these challenges	Advocacy	Advocacy
lobby activities to increase opportunities of sustained jobs in NTDs (funding and political priority)	Advocate for increased opportunities in NTDs	Advocacy
Ask OpenWHO to develop more courses?	advocate for OpenWHO courses	Advocacy
Use GSA momentum to advocate for facilitation of reagent procurement in endemic areas and foster the implication of service providers in endemic areas	Advocate for research support and procurement	Advocacy
Collaboration	collaboration	Collaboration
Providing collaboration	collaboration	Collaboration
Facilitate collaboration among different countries, to join projects and exchange students/researchers.	collaboration	Collaboration
skill library to identify collaborators etc	collaboration	Collaboration
Sample acquisition and linking GSA members with laboratories maintaining isolates/repositories of samples. E.g. SSR, SE Asian Center for Medical Malacology	Samples/biobank support - linking labs and samples	Collaboration
facilitate creating international collaborations	facilitate collaborations	Collaboration



Funding for promotion of behavior change - WASH	funding	Funding
Providing funding opportunities	Funding	Funding
list/ overview over some of all the excellent games, theater etc that are made to teach and interact around schisto education	List of creative comms for schistosomiasis	Comms listings
maybe a list of people who are qualified/would like to review papers (and what their expertise is)	List of ECR reviewers	Comms listings
lists of grant opportunities including small ones	List of grants	Comms listings
publishing grant calls	List of grants	Comms listings
Promote protocol sharing	Protocols list	Comms listings
repository for research grants easy to be periodically checked up;	repository of research grants	Comms listings
GSA to collate training/courses. Materials on the website are nice, but a more structured way or more periodicity would be great.	repository of training - more structured	Comms listings
List of freely available online bioinformatics workshops	List of workshops and training	Comms listings
Mentoring	mentoring	Mentoring
Mentorship	mentoring	Mentoring
international networks	networking	Networking and CoP
Creating a network with people who were awarded grants and can share tips/experiences.	networking	Networking and CoP

Networking	networking	Networking and CoP
networking cafes with specific topics	networking	Networking and CoP
How to match, connect and link different researchers in Africa?	networking	Networking and CoP
Network to allow communication and peer-to-peer support	networking	Networking and CoP
Online science cafe, or something that creates the opportunity to people get to know each other.	science café	Networking and CoP
Periodic café/discussion for networking	Online café discussion and networking	Networking and CoP
In-person meetings & conferences /perhaps more online sessions like this	Online café discussion and networking	Networking and CoP
Real-time communications - channels / platform	Real-time comms - Whatsapp	Networking and CoP
Helping with finding molecular trainings	training support	Training
Specific workshops / practical training schools (hybrid or onsite);	training support	Training
Providing training	training support	Training
training on how to review papers	training support	Training
formation sur l'analyse moleculaire	Training support	Training
Capacity building / top up skills: by linking ECR to key innovator. eg how to write research proposal; monitoring & evaluation protocol, etc	Training support	Training

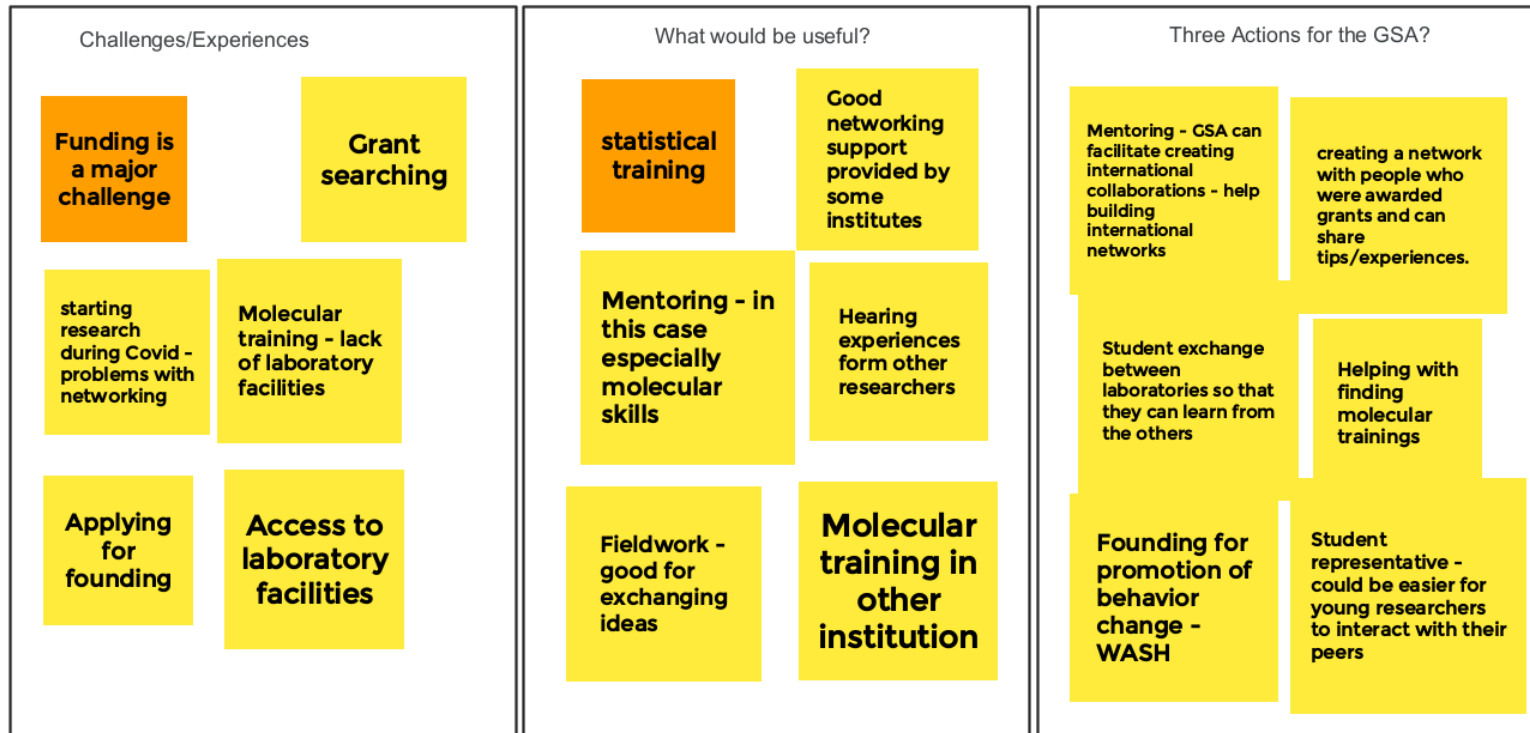


GSA to train ECR online on WHO goals-driven research or how to WHO-ise the research done in endemic area	Training support	Training
support visibility of individual ERCs on fx website, social media, newsletters	Visibility of ERCs	Visibility
Student exchange between laboratories so that they can learn from the others	student exchanges	Visibility
Student representative - could be easier for young researchers to interact with their peers	student representation	Visibility

Appendix 2 Discussion Group JamBoards

Breakout group 1: Epidemiology, Burden and Unmet Need

Share experiences of pursuing research in this area - what were some of the challenges
 What have you found useful in your career development -share examples from your institute/network/experience
 What are the top three points you think would be most useful for the GSA to do?

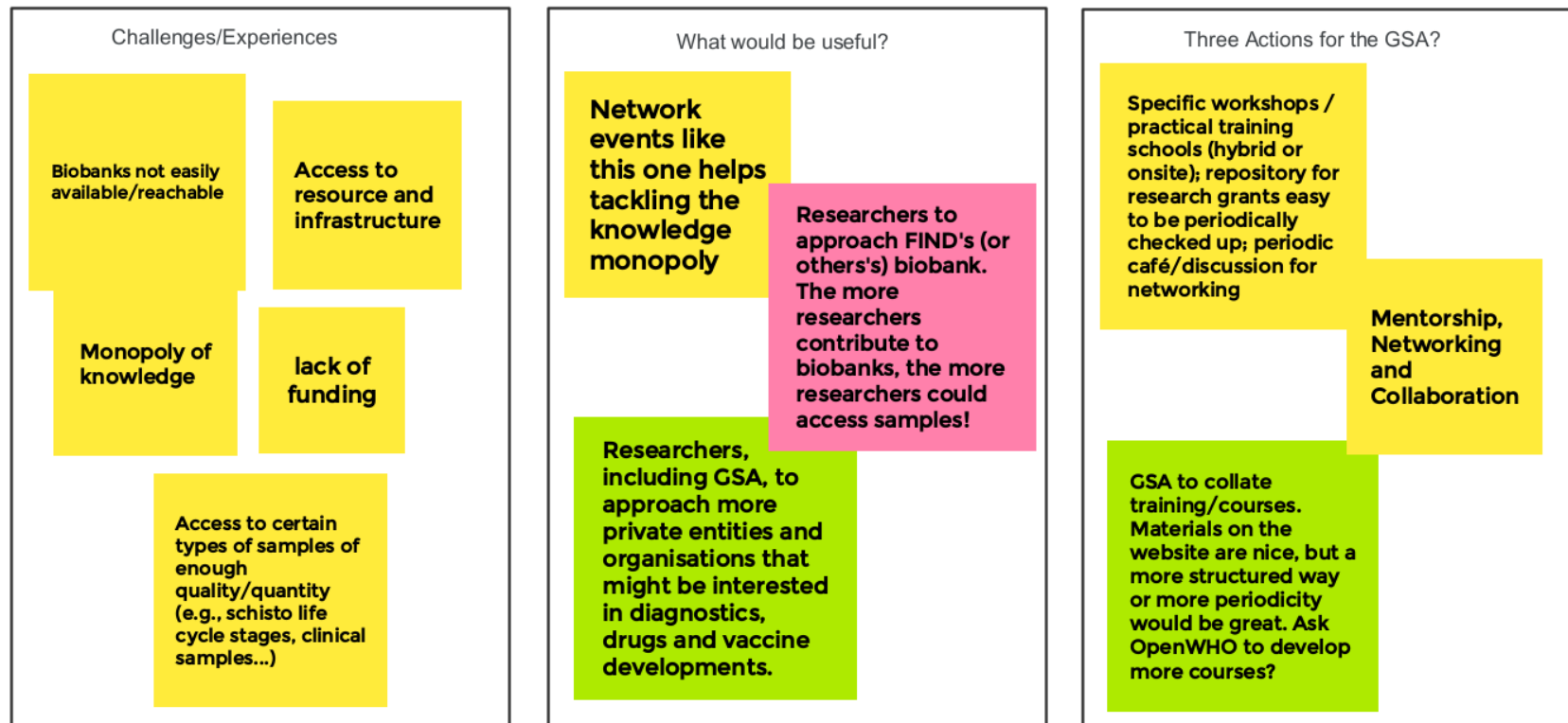


Breakout group 2: Implementation Research, Diagnostics, Drug Discovery, Vaccine

Share experiences of pursuing research in this area - what were some of the challenges

What have you found useful in your career development -share examples from your institute/network/experience

What are the top three points you think would be most useful for the GSA to do?



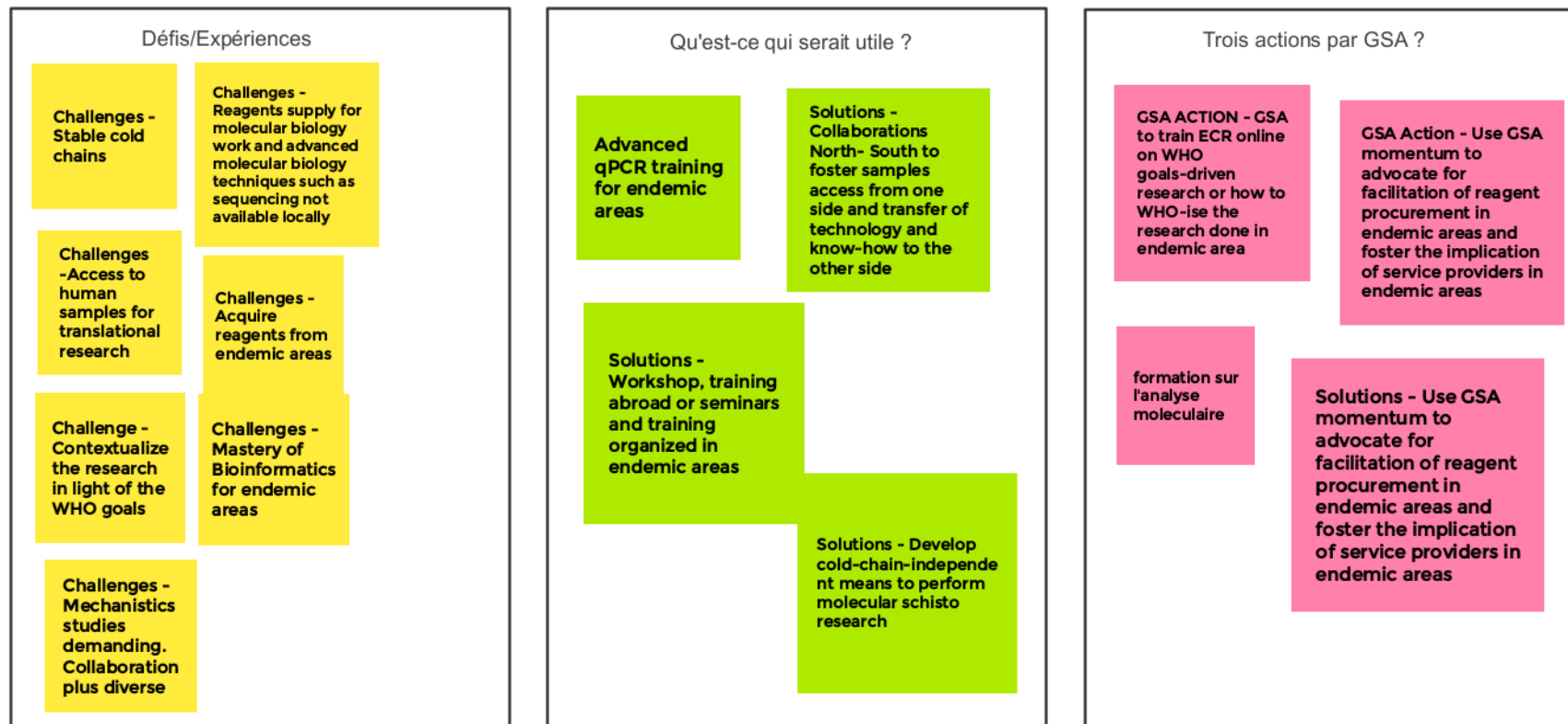
Breakout group 3: Molecular Research and Immunology

Share experiences of pursuing research in this area - what were some of the challenges
 What have you found useful in your career development -share examples from your institute/network/experience
 What are the top three points you think would be most useful for the GSA to do?



Breakout group : Recherche moléculaire et immunologie

Partagez vos expériences en matière de recherche dans ce domaine - quels ont été les défis à relever ?
 Qu'avez-vous trouvé utile dans votre développement de carrière - partagez des exemples de votre institut/réseau/expérience
 Quels sont les trois points qui, selon vous, seraient les plus utiles pour que la GSA aide les chercheurs en début de carrière ?



Breakout group 4: Environmental/Social Factors, and Behavioural Change

Share experiences of pursuing research in this area - what were some of the challenges
 What have you found useful in your career development -share examples from your institute/network/experience
 What are the top three points you think would be most useful for the GSA to do?

Challenges/Experiences	What would be useful?	Three Actions for the GSA?
<p>Lack of funding</p> <p>not enough means to conduct research - lack of funding, not enough researchers focusing on schisto;</p> <p>disconnect btw governments / MoH & those implementing control programmes</p> <p>Duplication of activities - who is supposed to do what, when? Lack of central oversight</p> <p>MoH or MoE? no comms btw leadership of different arms of govt / programmes</p> <p>not enough means to conduct research - lack of funding, not enough researchers focusing on schisto;</p> <p>IDsPs / security challenges in research / control programs. Control efforts are interrupted, migrating populations / carrying infection to new areas</p> <p>Lack of available partnership for research collaboration S-N / S-S</p> <p>Treatments are mainly targeting children</p> <p>lack of health education available in communities</p> <p>Climate Change; poverty; lack of water; sanitation</p> <p>PZQ is kept in offices - they are not distributed in a timely manner</p>	<p>plan activities based on challenges - to resolve the issues, monitoring activities</p> <p>M&E</p> <p>Integrate strategies into 1 program.</p> <p>Good communication planning and program including community - so health education becomes behaviour change</p> <p>community participation in program needs and local context and grassroots</p> <p>community participation in planning - key stakeholder!</p>	<p>How to match, connect and link different researchers in Africa?</p> <p>Network to allow communication and peer-to-peer support</p> <p>In-person meetings & conferences /perhaps more online sessions like this</p> <p>Real-time communications - channels / platform</p> <p>GSA / other networks to support overcoming these challenges</p> <p>Capacity building / top up skills: by linking ECR to key innovator. eg how to write research proposal; monitoring & evaluation protocol, etc</p>

Appendix 3 Meeting Agenda

Purpose and Objectives: The Schistosomiasis Early Career Researchers Online café is an informal online meeting to discuss ideas of how the GSA could be better leveraged to support Early Career Researchers (ECR) working on schistosomiasis. Discussions with ECRs during this 2-hour meeting will help us understand the current challenges faced by ECRs, the skills or support needed and potential ideas that the GSA could take forward to better serve our ECR stakeholders.

When: 27 July 2023, 1pm-3:15pm BST/WAT

Platform and format: Zoom (max 100 participants) with breakout rooms for research-interest themed group discussions.

Language: English main language with some interpretation support for French speakers. The presentations and discussions in sections 1 and 2 of the agenda will be in English with French interpretation available for French speakers. Unfortunately, interpretation is not an available function for all the breakout rooms. Most breakout rooms will have discussions in English. We have made two adjustments for our francophone participants based on preferences selected during the registration process:

1. An extra breakout discussion group **Recherche moléculaire et immunologie** will be led in French.
2. Our two interpreters will support French speakers in Breakout discussion group **Epidemiology, Burden and Unmet Need**.

If however people would like to add their comments to the JamBoard in French they are very welcome to do so for any of the breakout rooms.

Time (BST/WAT)	Theme	Moderator
Section 1	Introduction and questionnaire findings	
13:00 – 13:15	Welcome from co-chair/s of GSA RWG. Overview of purpose of meeting and objectives (15mins)	Derick Osakunor (co-chair GSA RWG)
13:15 -13:30	Share findings from ECR online questionnaire on challenges and needs (15mins)	Anouk Gouvras (GSA)
Section 2	Breakout rooms discussions	
13:30 – 13:40	Introduction to breakout room themes and discussion format	Anouk Gouvras (GSA)

	(10mins)	
13:40 – 14:20	<p>Breakout groups– each breakout group will have two/three facilitators to support discussions.</p> <p>1. Epidemiology, Burden and Unmet Need: Disease distribution, patterns, and impact on populations, including the monitoring and understanding of disease spread and burden. It also includes a specific focus on disease forms, such as genital schistosomiasis, as well as considerations for hybridization and zoonotic transmission.</p> <p>2. Implementation Research, Diagnostics, Drug Discovery, Vaccines: Involves research and development activities related to combating Schistosomiasis.</p> <p>3. Molecular Research and Immunology: Related to genetic and molecular aspects of disease as well as the immune response to the infection.</p> <p>4. Recherche moléculaire et immunologie: Related to genetic and molecular aspects of disease as well as the immune response to the infection (French group).</p> <p>5. Environmental/Social Factors, and Behavioural Change: Focuses on environmental and social factors (including intermediate host snails/malacology, WASH) and their impact on disease transmission, as well as communication strategies related to disease prevention, control, and health promotion.</p> <p>(40mins)</p>	
Section 3	Summary of ideas and networking opportunity	
14:20 – 14:55	<p>Convene and share key points and findings from the breakout group discussions.</p> <p>5 mins per breakout group</p> <p>Discuss next steps and share GSA information for ECRs.</p> <p>(35mins)</p>	<p>Derick Osakunor (co-chair GSA RWG)</p>
14:55-15:15	Networking opportunity and continue discussions (20mins)	

Appendix 4 Slide Deck Presented At The ECR Online Café

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1CGopULNXc-0mP-ndJdAKqEB3j1YrUZ8X/view?usp=drive_link