



REPORT ON NATIONAL LAUNCH OF HIV SELF-TESTING (HIVST) HELD ON 19TH JULY, 2023, AT OMANYE ABA HALL, ACCRA METROPOLITAN ASSEMBLY, ACCRA.



GHANA HIV AND AIDS NETWORK (GHANET)

INTRODUCTION

The National Launch of HIV Self-Testing (HIVST) in Ghana was held at the Omanyee Aba Hall of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly on July 19, 2023. The event which was held under the theme, "Test Yourself: Know Your Status" attracted about 345 participants. Some of the participants included the following dignitaries:

- Hon. Kwaku Agyeman-Manu** – Minister for Health
- Nii Ahele Nunoo III** – Paramount Chief of the Abola Traditional Area
- Hon. Elizabeth Naa Kwatsoe Tawiah Sackey** – Mayor of Accra
- Dr. Mokowa Blay Adu-Gyamfi** – Presidential Advisor on HIV/AIDS at the Office of the President
- Hon. Sebastian Sandaare** – Member of Parliament for Daffiama/ Bussie/ Issa Constituency
- Mr. Hector Sucilla Perez** – UNAIDS Country Director
- Dr. Kyeremeh Atuahene** – Director-General, Ghana AIDS Commission (GAC)
- Dr. Franklin Asiedu-Bekoe** – Director of Public Health, Ghana Health Service, representing the Director-General
- Dr. Stephen Ayisi Addo** – Program Manager, NACP
- Mrs. Elsie Ayeh** – President, Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS



Nii Ahele Nunoo III
Paramount Chief of the Abola Traditional Area

A woman with dark curly hair, wearing a black t-shirt with a red HIVST logo, holds up a white OraQuick HIV self-test kit. The background is a red banner with the text "National Launch of HIV SELF-TESTING".

National Launch of HIV SELF-TESTING

Special Guest of Honour
Hon. Kwaku Agyeman-Manu
(Minister for Health)

Test Yourself: Know Your Status

WED. 19TH JULY, 2023 9 AM
Omanyee Aba Hall (Accra Metropolitan Assembly)

HIVST
HIV SELF-TESTING

Logos: Ghana Health Service, Ghana AIDS Commission, UNAIDS, World Health Organization, USAID, EpiC, JSE, NACP, SH:24, WAPAS, PSGH, OraQuick, SH:24, WAPAS, PSGH.

OPENING REMARKS

The event was chaired by Nii Ahele Nunoo III (Paramount Chief of the Abola Traditional Area and Chief-Advisor to His Royal Majesty, King Tackie Teiko Tsuru, Ga Mantse. Mr. Jacob Acquah Andoh (Public Relations Officer, GHS) was the master of ceremony (MC) of the program which was streamed live on virtual platforms including Facebook and Zoom.

In his opening remarks Nii Ahele Nunoo thanked all the participants for being present and said that he was well pleased to be in the midst of all the dignitaries present. He informed the participants that they were gathered to be enlightened on how to know their HIV status by themselves and at their own convenience. He mentioned that it is very necessary for individuals to know their HIV status so that they can be guided to choose less risky lifestyles. According to him, it was a rare honour and privilege to be selected to chair an event as prestigious as the National Launch of HIVST. He expressed the hope that the program would serve as a catalyst to improve participants' knowledge about HIV and consequently embrace HIVST.



Hon. Elizabeth Naa Kwatsoe Tawiah Sackey
Mayor of Accra

WELCOME ADDRESS

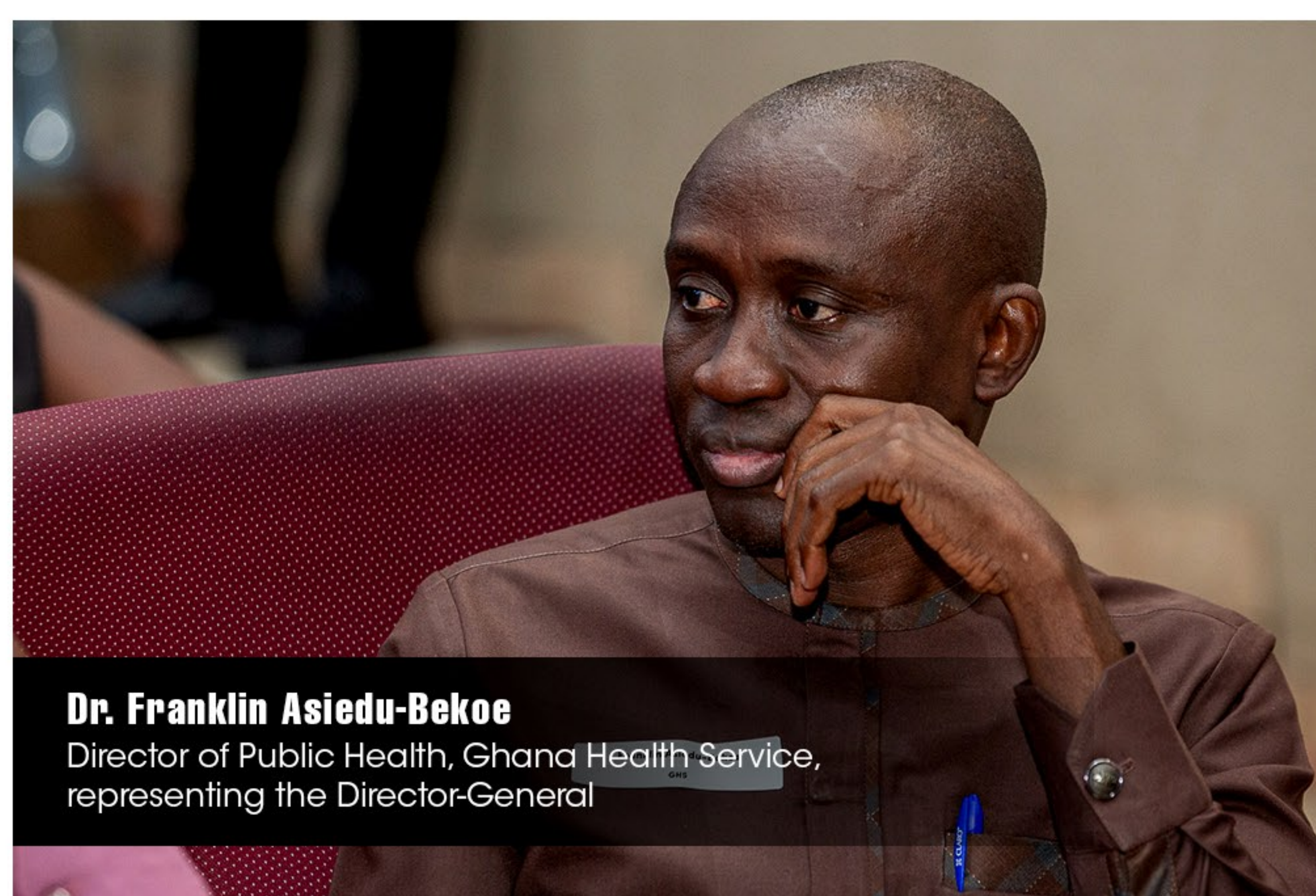
Hon. Elizabeth Naa Kwatsoe Tawiah Sackey, Mayor of Accra, welcomed participants with a warm smile and entreated them “feel at home.” She indicated that she was elated the Omanyeba Hall was chosen as the venue for the National Launch and commended the Minister for Health for his visionary leadership and commitment to the health and wellbeing of the nation. She stated that an event such as the Launch required a great deal of effort and planning, therefore, the National Planning Committee of the program deserved to be commended for making it possible. She mentioned that the presence of high-profile stakeholders was an indication of the overall importance of the program whose objective is to reach out to underserved populations in collective effort of all partners to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Ghana.

The Mayor of Accra urged participants to remember the profound impact of knowledge and awareness the individuals in the society will receive as the journey of HIVST is embarked on. She indicated that testing oneself empowers the individual to know their status, seek necessary care and support, and make informed decisions that can impact their lives positively. She further reminded participants not to underestimate the potential threat of HIV/AIDS on the society and encouraged everyone to support the vision of making an HIV-free nation.

Purpose of gathering

On behalf of the Director-General of the GHS, Dr. Franklin Asiedu Bekoe welcomed participants to the gathering. He announced that the Ministry of Health (MoH), through the GHS,

has been implementing several interventions towards achieving the UNAIDS’ 95-95-95 targets, and one of these interventions is HIVST which is under the Differentiated Service Delivery (DSD) module. He intimated that HIVST has been proven globally as being effective for the discovery of hidden HIV cases and facilitating linkage to care of persons living with HIV (PLHIV). Dr. Bekoe stated that the GHS, through the NACP, in collaboration with GAC and partners, developed the relevant policy and guidelines for this initiative and the guidelines include community sensitization, online and in-person capacity building, training for stakeholders, technical evaluation of selected HIVST kits, and procurement and testing of kits. He indicated that the purpose of the gathering was to climax all the efforts with a National Launch. He said that this would pave way for a national scale-up and enable Ghana to improve on her first 95 from the current 72% to 95% by 2025.



Dr. Franklin Asiedu-Bekoe
Director of Public Health, Ghana Health Service,
representing the Director-General

Dr. Bekoe thanked all Development Partners and Civil Society Organizations for the support given to GHS to come thus far. He further urged participants to contribute towards a successful implementation of the HIVST pilot, as well as the plans to scale up the intervention. He expressed optimism that the remaining 28% of PLHIV would be found sooner than late and be linked to care. He entreated every Ghanaian to embrace the HIVST initiative as part of efforts to bring healthcare to the doorsteps of all and sundry, stressing that motto of GHS: “Your health is our concern”.



Dr. Kyeremeh Atuahene
Director-General, Ghana AIDS Commission (GAC)

OVERVIEW OF HIV AND AIDS SITUATION IN GHANA

Addressing participants, Dr. Kyeremeh Atuahene said it was a great honor to be present at the occasion of the launch of HIVST and, because of the importance he attached to the special event, he would not want any other HIV data to compete with the subject matter “HIVST” in the media space for the next one to two weeks. He thanked the GHS, NACP, GHANET, Development Partners and all stakeholders for working assiduously towards the launch of HIVST in Ghana after the policy on Self-Testing was adopted. Dr. Atuahene informed participants that they were gathered in order to introduce an important innovation to help address a critical issue that continues to challenge the national progress towards the elimination of HIV and AIDS: case detection. He explained that the ability of a country to diagnose its HIV population is the key

determinant of success towards achieving the 95-95-95 goals. This is because HIV testing is the entry route to the treatment cascade; therefore, the achievement of the second and third 95s hinge on the first 95.

Dr. Atuahene declared that, at the current rate of progress, Ghana is unlikely to achieve the 95-95-95 targets by the end of 2030 because, as at December 2022, Ghana had only achieved 72%, compared to 82% in West and Central Africa. He, however, expressed confidence that from the progress made by GHANET, so far, he sees HIVST as a gamechanger that would enable the country achieve the targets. He noted that from what he has read about some countries concerning the initiative of self-testing, it appears Ghana has done very well in the first year of HIVST Program. GHANET has been able to distribute about 70,000 self-test kits in the last 6 months, as against 28,000 in the UK in the first 8 months. He emphasized that without knowing one’s HIV status, individuals cannot access appropriate prevention services, initiate treatment if positive, or contribute effectively towards breaking the chain of HIV transmission. He said that testing is the foundation upon which effective HIV prevention and care programs are anchored, hence, the need to scale up HIV testing.



Ernest Ortsin
President, GHANET

Dr. Atuahene added that HIVST is an additional innovative solution to address the gaps in HIV testing and encourage more people to know their HIV status and everyone must embrace it. He said that HIVST gives the individuals the empowerment to discretely and conveniently test themselves, and by expanding access to self-testing, Ghana can overcome barriers



Dr. Stephen Ayisi Addo
Program Manager, NACP

ers related to stigma concerns about privacy and confidentiality that usually deter individuals from seeking traditional testing services. He stressed that, in the national pursuit to end the HIV epidemic, we must prioritize the effective targeting of key populations and hard-to-reach and underserved populations.

Ending his presentation, Dr. Atuahene outlined some critical measures that would ensure increased uptake of the HIVST services; the procedure for testing, the information that will facilitate linking of testers to health facilities for further diagno

ses, counselling and treatment or prevention services are all in place to give testers the satisfaction and confidence to encourage other people to use self-testing. He reminded participants that HIV is still a public health threat in Ghana as the number of HIV new infections average about 16,400, annually. He added that the situation calls for urgent actions to prevent further transmission by providing treatment for those living with HIV, and ensure equitable access to health care services. He encouraged people living with HIV (PLHIV) who are on anti-retroviral therapy (ART) to adhere to treatment in order to achieve and maintain a virally suppressed status to enjoy good health and productive life.

ROLLOUT OF HIV SELF-TESTING IN GHANA

Dr. Stephen Ayisi Addo expressed delight to see the 19th of July, 2023, because to him, the day symbolizes triumph over all the obstacles that delayed the National Launch of HIVST. He revealed that earlier plans to launch the HIVST in the first and second quarters of the year were unsuccessful due to a barrage of challenges. Therefore, hence, the day marked a major milestone. Dr. Ayisi Addo explained that HIVST is an evolution from provider-initiated counselling and testing with a 7 to 14 day results turnaround time, through provider initiated testing and counselling, through couple counselling and testing, through family-based index testing and counselling to HIV testing and linkage to treatment, care and support. He indicated that today, a 'lay person' can receive and test themselves without the presence and direct supervision of any health care worker, in the comfort of their confidential space and get results within 20 minutes using HIVST kits. He informed participants that the HIVST is a trial test to complement the routine tests conducted by trained service providers, hence, a reactive HIVST result must be confirmed by the routine algo



rithm using the three different tests in series before a person is declared to be HIV positive. He further explained that unlike malaria, one cannot be declared positive for HIV without confirmatory tests. This is especially due to the high incidence of stigma related to HIV.

Dr. Ayisi Addo announced that in 2016, Ghana adopted the 'Treat All' policy and developed a manual for HIV Differentiated Service Delivery (DSD) module of care in 2018. He said since HIV testing is the entry point to treatment and viral load monitoring, differentiated HIV testing is an important intervention, expected to improve access to HIV screening services within the key, vulnerable, and general populations. He further indicated that the HIV and AIDS National Strategic Plans, 2016 to 2020, and 2021 to 2025 provide the strategic direction for the rollout of HIVST and other important policies, so in March 2020, the GHS, through NACP constituted the technical working group to come out with the requisite technical guidelines and necessary protocols for the rollout of this intervention. He noted that Ghana begun implementation this year to support key population-led approach and accelerate progress towards the 95=95=95 goals. He noted that EpiC, with strong support from USAID, GAC, UN Partners and other stakeholders (particularly the NACP-led committee) accelerated key components of the implementation plan that led to the jumpstart of HIVST implementation in two regions among key populations in March 2021. He said that the key components of the implementation plan included technical evaluation, quantification and forecasting, and procurement of HIVST kits, selection of two regions, Ashanti and Greater Accra, health facilities for the HIVST delivery. He further indicated that there was an adaptation of self-test monitoring tools and training of 25 national HIVST master trainers, selected from local NGOs and CSOs, and clinicians who cascaded to 189 community volunteer staff of local partners and healthcare workers in the two regions. He added that there was the establishment of a human-centered virtual intervention for local HIVST delivery that is being led SH:24, a UK-based online sexual reproductive health service provider, through the Global Fund DSD Strategic Initiatives (DSD-SI). He added that this is expected to contribute to increasing the uptake by key populations.

Dr. Ayisi Addo mentioned that a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed with GHANET in the last quarter of 2022 to undertake distribution, community sensitization, and stakeholder engagement in 50 districts in the country, which led to this very important launch. He said as he spoke, GHANET has distributed about 70,000 self-test kits in the 50 districts. He further mentioned that a permanent tele-counselling has been established in GHANET where counselling is given to both negative and positive clients. He said that so far, reactive cases range from 7% to 14%.

Dr. Ayisi Addo further informed participants that there were some challenges as they progressed. These challenges include delayed technical assistance, stock out of routine tests for confirmation, limited funds, and high community and self-stigma. He explained that one of the feedbacks he received from the pilot of the HIVST is that some tested reactive

but were negative on confirmation and that this is not unusual at all. He said the HIVST is a trial test and always needs confirmatory test. He added that there will be revision and procurement of more kits for the HIVST program.

Concluding his address, he appreciated the Global Fund, UNAIDS, USAID, GAC, CSOs, leadership of GHS, and all stakeholders at the Ministry of Health for the encouragement and support so far. He expressed his excitement about the prospects of this initiative and urged everyone to keep supporting in order to achieve the 95-95-95 goals.



DOCUMENTARY

A documentary on the HIVST implementation by GHANET was aired to the participants. Featured in the documentary were Dr. Ayisi-Addo, Mr. Ernest Ortsin (President, GHANET), Ms Gertrude Nunoo (EpiC Project Manager), Enoch Assan Ninson (Project Manager, SH:24), Mr. Kofi Yalley (K. Yalley Co. Ltd.), Dr. Henry Nagai (Chief of Party, USAID Care and Country Representative, JSI). The documentary highlights the history and current situation of HIV/AIDS in Ghana and the past and present interventions put in place to curb the menace. The individuals who represented the various Implementing Partners and organizations indicated the roles they play to make the HIVST project successful. Dr. Ayisi Addo mentioned that in order to end HIV, we first have to focus on the first 95. He said at the end of 2022, Ghana was at 72%, against the 95% target. Mr. Ernest Ortsin mentioned that GHANET is implementing the HIVST project with 50 member NGOs at the district level. The documentary illustrated how volunteers of the implementing NGOS go about the distribution of the self-testing kits in the communities. Volunteers indicated that some members of the community are impressed with the HIVST initiative because of the convenience and confidentiality it provides, while other people do not want to hear anything about HIV at all. Dr. Henry Nagai stated that there are several interventions that the country has been able to provide for citizens and one of them is the availability of HIVST kits. He said HIVST is a way to empower individuals to know their HIV status in the comfort of their homes. He expressed his excitement about the fact the Ghana is at this level. The documentary also highlighted some benefits and advantages of the HIVST, including the fact that it provides privacy, gives quick results, is convenient and confidential.

DEMONSTRATION OF HIVST KITS

A team of volunteers on the HIVST project, led by Mr. Nicholas Duho, demonstrated to participants how to use the Oraquick HIVST kit. Mr. Duho informed participants that before the procedure begins, the hands must be clean. After that, the tester should check the expiry date on the pack and also ensure that it is well sealed. He mentioned that when you open the pack, there is a manual that gives directives on how to test. Also, there is a stand, a liquid known as chase buffer, and the test kit. He told participants to fix the tube of chase buffer on the stand and put it in a flat surface. After that, the tester must proceed to swab the test kit on the upper and lower gum for about 3 times and put it in the tube. He said after this, participants should time themselves 20 minutes after which they can check the results.



Mr. Duho proceeded to explain to participants how results on the HIVST kits are read. He explained that the test kit has a control (C) and test (T) column and if there are two lines, that is on both C and T, it means the result is reactive and the individual has to go for a confirmatory test at the nearest health facility. However, if there is only one line and it is on C, it means non-reactive. He said that in cases where there are no lines at all or there is only one line and it is on T, it means that the result is invalid. He advised participants to wait for at least 30 minutes after eating or brushing the teeth to take the test because foods and toothpastes have chemicals in them that can interfere with the result (either a false positive or negative).

SOLIDARITY MESSAGES

After the team's demonstration, solidarity messages were welcomed from Parliament of Ghana, Development Partners, and Civil Society Organizations.

Office of the President

Dr. Amb. Mokowa Blay Adu-Gyamfi, Presidential Advisor on HIV and AIDS, represented the Office of the President. She conveyed a message of warm felicitations on behalf of the President, H.E. Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, who is the Chairperson of the Ghana AIDS Commission Governing Board. She used the occasion to reiterate the commitment of the president towards Ghana's attainment of the 95-95-95 UNAIDS targets and the ending of HIV and AIDS as a public health threat in the country by the year 2030.



Dr. Amb. Mokowa Blay Adu-Gyamfi
Presidential Advisor on HIV/AIDS at the
Office of the President

Development Partners

Mr. Hector Sucilla Perez, UNAIDS Country Director, highlighted the significant roles of the various development partners towards the materialization of the HIVST project in Ghana. He encouraged everyone to get tested and convince other people to do so. He affirmed the commitment of the Development Partners towards getting rid of HIV and AIDS in Ghana and the world at large.



Mr. Hector Sucilla Perez
UNAIDS Country Director

Parliament of Ghana

Hon. Sebastian Sandaare, Member of Parliament for Daffiama/Bussie/Issa Constituency said he was happy that the organizers of the program included Members of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Health in the mapping of stakeholders. He assured participants of the support of the Parliament of Ghana in the deployment of HIVST and ultimately the fight to end HIV and AIDS by 2030.



Hon. Sebastian Sandaare
Member of Parliament for Daffiama/
Bussie/ Issa Constituency

Civil Society Organizations

On behalf of Civil Society Organizations, Mrs. Elsie Ayeh, president of Network of Persons Living with HIV (NAP+) acknowledged the importance of HIVST. She assured participants that there is life after testing positive for HIV and that it is not the end of the world as some people think. She encouraged every individual to take charge of their lives and get tested in order to know their HIV status. She pledged the support of all CSO networks towards the implementation of the HIVST project.



Mrs. Elsie Ayeh
President, Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS



KEYNOTE ADDRESS AND OFFICIAL LAUNCH

Upon taking the podium as the keynote speaker for the occasion, the Honorable Minister for Health, Kwaku Agyeman-Manu, informed the participants that he was indisposed but due to the importance he attaches to National Launch of the HIVST, he had to defy his doctor's advice, to be present. He informed participants that the purpose for being present at the program was not only to patronize the HIVST but to advocate for other people to boldly test as well, using the HIVST. He expressed immense pride in the moment of launching HIVST in Ghana. He said that the theme, "Test Yourself, Know Your Status", is very appropriate considering the recent increase in new HIV infections in Ghana. According to him, it is a pleasure and privilege as the Minister for Health to address participants, as the country marks such an important milestone in



the effort to combat HIV. He announced that the availability of the HIVST kits is a significant step forward in the quest to create a healthier nation.

After briefing participants on the current situation of HIV in the country and the world at large, Hon. Agyeman-Manu informed participants that testing is the foundation upon which the entire response to HIV is built, as it is the gateway to prevention, treatment, care and support services. He said that the country is embarking on a new chapter in the fight against the HIV epidemic by launching the HIVST program, which aims at expanding access to HIV testing services by increasing early detection, reducing stigma and ensuring timely intervention and treatment for all who need it. He commended the National Planning Committee, partners and every individual who worked tirelessly to make the National Launch a success. In his final words, Hon. Agyeman-Manu declared the HIVST program officially launched.

and eradicate the HIV epidemic. After a closing prayer was said, participants took group photos and also visited exhibition booths mounted by HIVST suppliers.



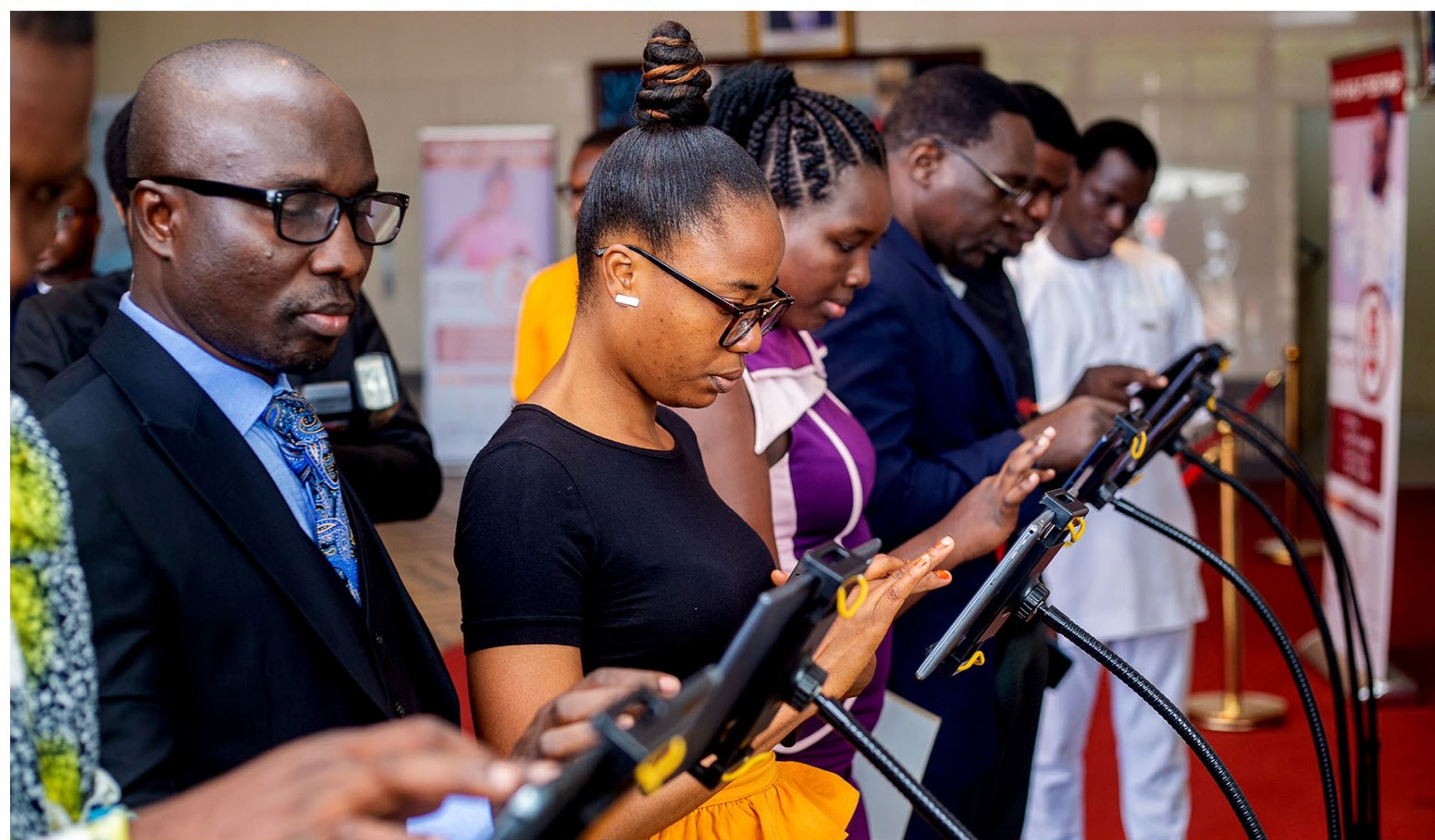
CLOSING REMARKS

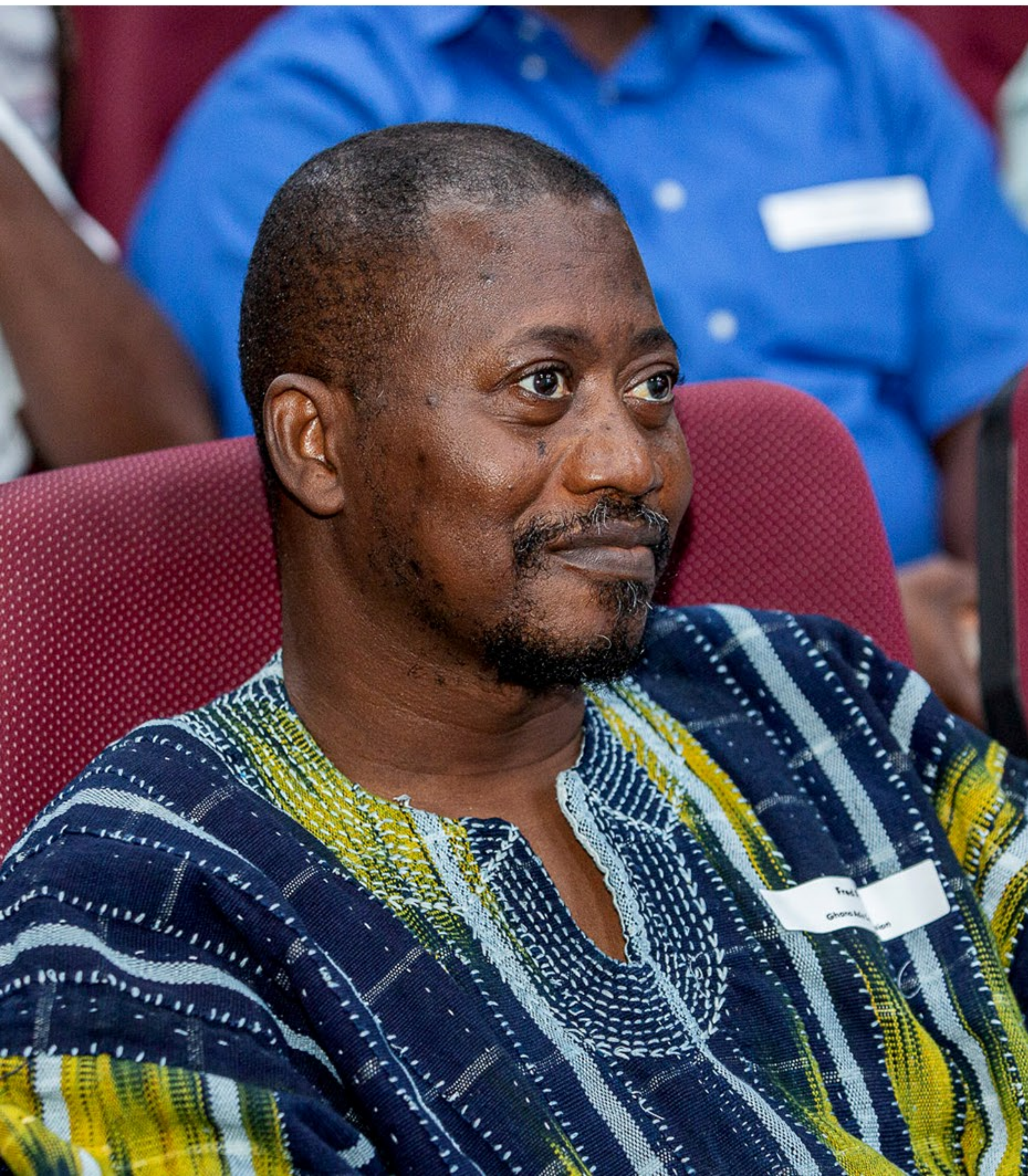
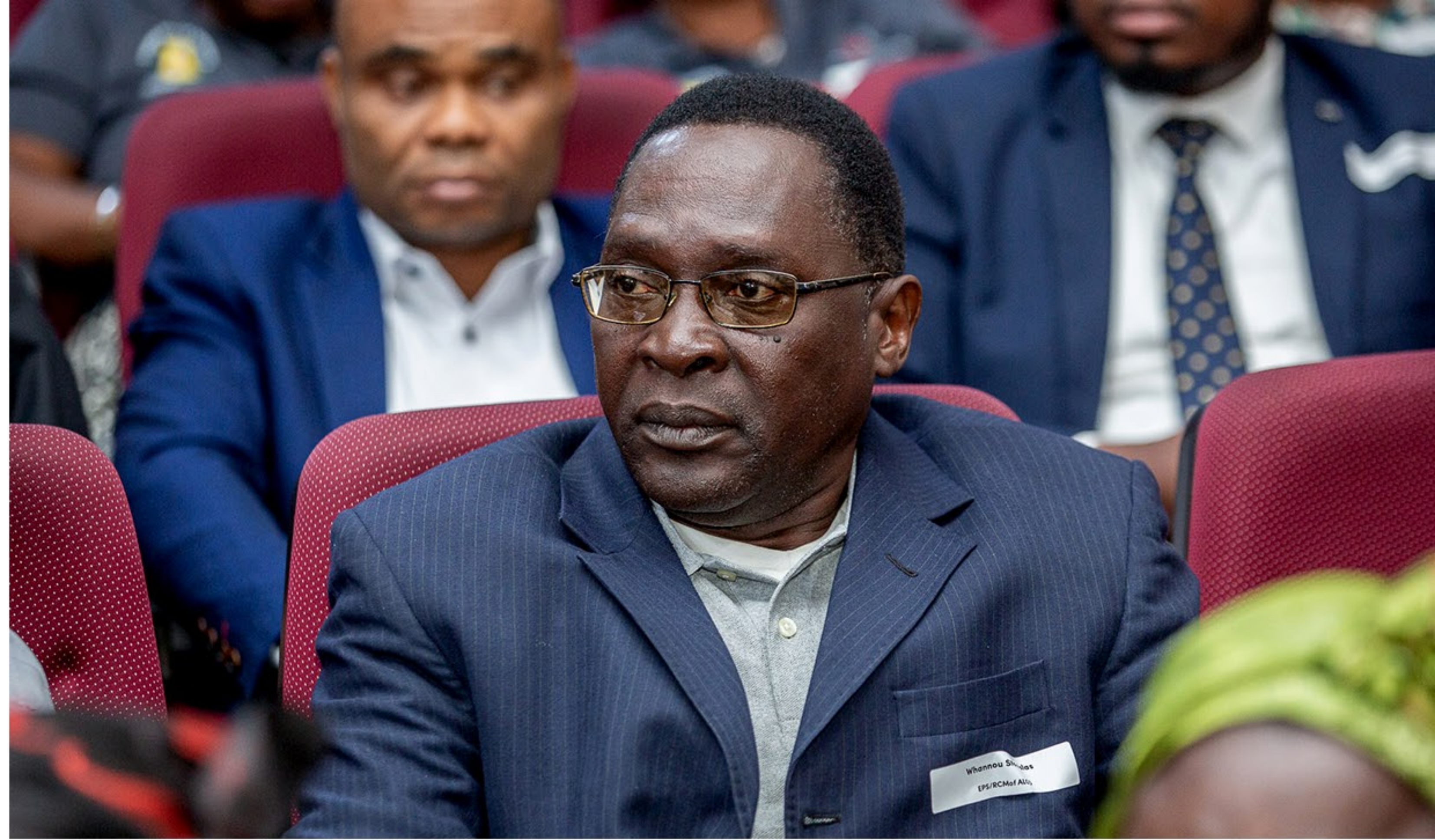
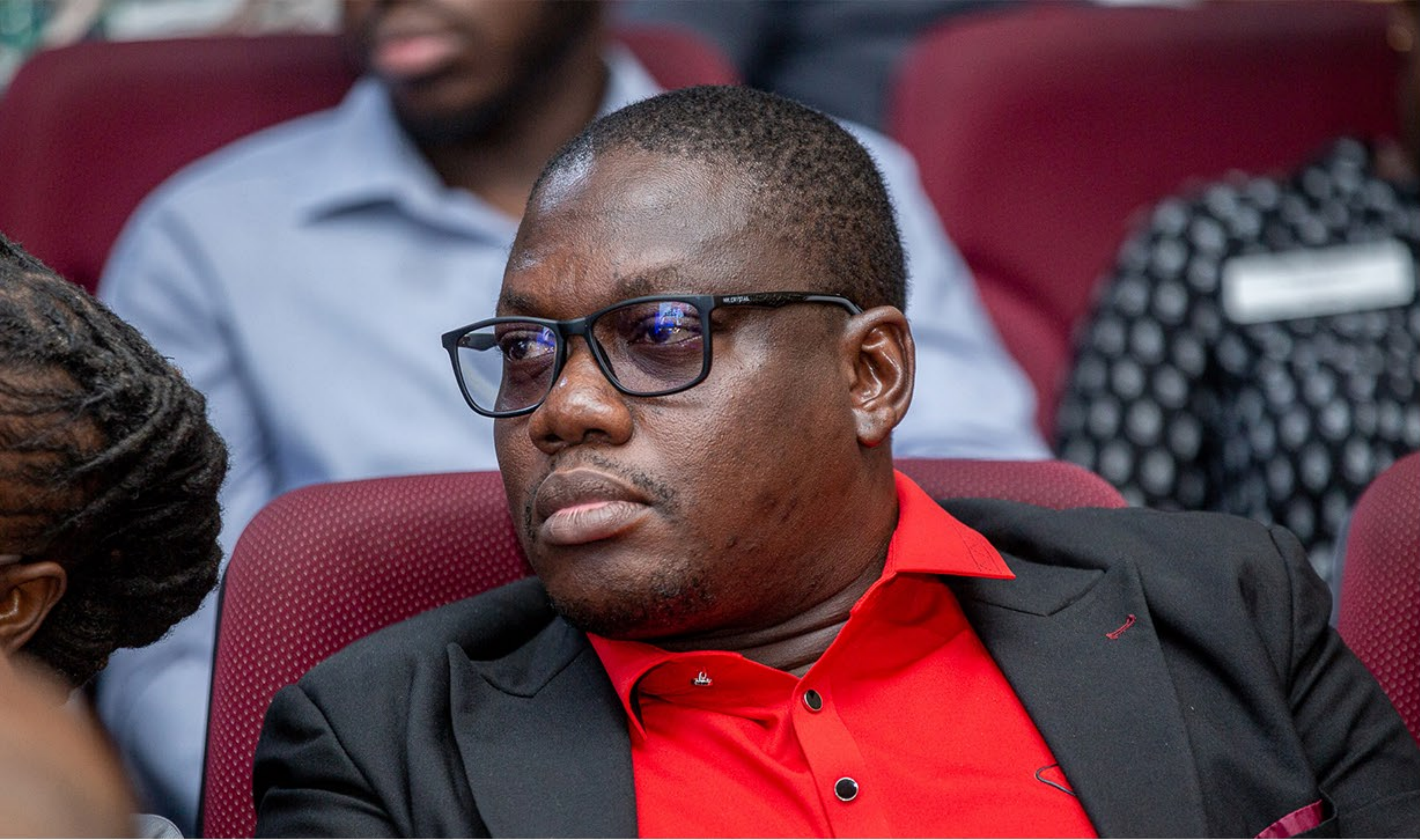
In his closing remarks, the chairman exhorted participants to help spread the “gospel of HIVST” to every household and also participate in self-testing. He thanked participants for coming for the National Launch of the HIVST and wished them well.

CONCLUSION

Mrs. Victoria Araba Dennis, vice president of GHANET, rendered the vote of thanks in which she expressed appreciation to all present. She noted the proceedings of the launch indicate the willingness of all partners and individuals to fight















GHANA HIV AND AIDS NETWORK (GHANET)

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HELD ON 19TH JULY, 2023, @ OMANYE ABA HALL, ACCRA
METROPOLITAN ASSEMBLY, ACCRA.

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