



**TOWARDS UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE –  
STRENGTHENING PRIMARY HEALTH CARE –  
A WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT, WHOLE OF SOCIETY APPROACH**

## **Concept paper for The South African Primary Health Care Conference**

**14 to 17 November 2023  
Eastern Cape (East London)**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This concept paper sets out the goals and objectives of the national Primary Health Care (PHC) Conference to be held in South Africa during 14 to 17 November 2023.

## 2. BACKGROUND

In its 2008 World Health Report, which carried the theme 'Primary Health Care: Now more than ever', and which coincided with the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Alma-Ata Declaration adopted in Kazakhstan in 1978, the World Health Organization (WHO) re-asserted the vision of PHC as "a set of values and principles for guiding the development of health systems".<sup>1</sup> The WHO also advanced four sets of essential reforms that created a nexus between the "the values of primary health care, the expectations of citizens and the common health performance challenges that cut across all contexts".<sup>1</sup> These were: *universal coverage reforms* to ensure that health systems contribute to health equity; *service delivery reforms* that re-organise health services around people's needs and expectations; *public policy reforms* that secure healthier communities; and *leadership reforms* that replace command and control with the inclusive, participatory, negotiation-based leadership required by the complexity of contemporary health systems.<sup>1</sup> Fifteen years later, this set of reforms remains pertinent, particularly as the global community strives towards achieving universal health coverage (UHC), and because South Africa has recorded variable progress towards these goals.

Worldwide, nations have committed to the attainment of UHC, and enshrined this in the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030 – a horizon that coincides with South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP). The NDP re-affirmed the country's commitment to establishing a community-orientated primary care approach.

In keeping with global developments, over the almost 30 years of democracy in South Africa, the government has led the transformation of the health system from being fragmented, inequitable, racially segregated and predominantly curative, into a comprehensive and integrated health system based on PHC principles. Access to PHC services, measured in terms of headcounts, has increased from 67 million in 1998<sup>2</sup> to 106 million in 2022/23.<sup>3</sup> Efforts to continuously enhance the quality of PHC services include the Ideal Clinic Realisation and Maintenance Programme (which resulted in 2 046 facilities achieving ideal status in 2022/23<sup>4</sup>), as well as implementation of the National Quality Improvement Programme (NQIP). By the end of March 2023, there were 167 Quality Learning Centres (QLCs) with 235 of 353 hospitals and 1 546 of 3 225 PHC facilities, resulting in a cumulative total of 1 781 of 3 578 (49.77%) public sector facilities implementing the NQIP.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, to ensure access to PHC services by rural communities, Community Health Workers within the Ward-based PHC Outreach Teams visited 30 967 463 households and 106 401 284 fixed PHC services from 2022 to 2023.

In accordance with South Africa's aspirations for UHC, two important and historic milestones were the endorsement by Cabinet of the National Health Insurance (NHI) Policy in 2017<sup>5</sup>, and the subsequent approval by the National Assembly in Parliament of the NHI Bill 2019, in June 2023. This Bill serves as the enabling legislation for NHI, through which the country seeks to achieve UHC. Both the NHI Policy and NHI Bill accentuate the centrality of comprehensive PHC as the backbone of the health system. The NHI Bill 2019 introduces the District Health

Management Offices (DHMOs) and Contracting Units for Primary Health Care (CUPS). Its focus is on the co-ordination and purchase of services within the districts.

### **3. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The month of September 2023 will also mark 45 years since the historic Alma Ata Conference on PHC in Kazakhstan, and in October 2023, we mark five years since the international PHC Conference in Astana. It is therefore necessary and fitting that during this year, we reflect on and review South Africa's journey towards the ideals of PHC over our 30 years of democracy. Delegates at the conference will have to take stock of what has worked over the past years, reasons for success, and how to use what has worked to build for the future.

Secondly, a need exists to continuously improve the quality and enhance the profile of PHC services in the country, not only in anticipation of the forthcoming NHI dispensation, but also as a routine responsibility to provide accessible, affordable and acceptable services to all communities.

Thirdly, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there was a decrease in access to PHC services, partly due to the national lockdown which restricted social and economic activity as part of public health containment measures. To minimise the risk of infection, users of health services were encouraged to contact health services only in cases of absolute necessity. Access to PHC services subsequently increased in 2021 and 2022, but not to pre-COVID-19 levels. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, wherein countries are developing pandemic prevention, preparedness and response measures, and also advancing their progress towards UHC, it is imperative to emphasise the importance of the PHC approach.

Against this background, the national government of South Africa, represented by the National Department of Health (NDoH) and the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), seeks to convene a national PHC conference from 14 to 17 November 2023.

### **4. GOALS**

- (a) To reinvigorate South Africa's commitment to the PHC approach as a strategic component of comprehensive health services in a unified health system, within an NHI dispensation
- (b) To recommit the country (i.e. government, citizens and social partners) to the PHC principles as being central to health promotion, disease prevention, and building a people-centred and resilient health system that is able to adapt and respond to emerging health challenges in a rapidly changing world.<sup>6</sup>

### **5. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of the national PHC Conference are as follows:

- (a) To take stock of the implementation of the PHC approach by the democratic government from 1994 to 2023
- (b) To identify gaps in implementation and context specific areas of good practice, and share lessons learnt

- (c) To draw lessons from international experiences (such as Thailand, Vietnam, Cuba, Mauritius etc.) in the implementation of the PHC approach and delivery of PHC services, particularly from countries in the global South with socio-economic conditions that are comparable with South Africa's
- (d) To accentuate the relevance and importance of PHC in South Africa's pursuit of UHC through NHI
- (e) To prepare for the imminent implementation of DHMOs and CUPS in keeping with the NHI dispensation
- (f) To envision a comprehensive and unified PHC-based health system in South Africa, integrating the public and private sectors with sufficient focus on the social determinants of health
- (g) To position PHC services as the backbone for pandemic prevention, preparedness and response, drawing lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and the cholera outbreak in 2023.

## **6. PARTICIPANTS**

The NDoH and the DPME anticipate that about 350 people will participate in the November 2023 National PHC Conference. These delegates will be drawn from government, non-governmental and community-based organisations (NGOs; CBOs); civil society; academia and research institutions; the private sector; organised labour; and the complementary/alternative healing sector, among others.

## **7. ORGANISATION OF WORK AND CONFERENCE PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT**

The National PHC Conference will comprise plenary and breakaway sessions. The opening and closing will be plenary fora, with the bulk of the conference programme consisting of breakaway commissions and report-back sessions.

The conference is likely to attract international speakers from countries that have successfully implemented the PHC approach and thereby improved their key health outcomes.

In addition, the conference provides an opportunity for Provincial, District and Sub-district Departments of Health in South Africa to showcase their successes in improving population using the PHC approach. Programme space will also be provided for presentations and input from organisations in other sectors on innovative approaches that can add value to health interventions through collaboration in the context of a whole-of-society approach.

## **8. THEME OF THE NATIONAL PHC CONFERENCE**

The theme of the conference will be designed by the NDoH and DPME in consultation with the Ministry of Health and the Presidency. The emphasis of the adopted theme will be on the re-invigoration of the PHC approach in pursuit of UHC through NHI in South Africa. Both the Government Communication and Information Services (GCIS) and the Communication Chief Directorate of the NDoH will actively publicise this conference, before, during and after its occurrence.

## 9. TRACKS OF THE NATIONAL PHC CONFERENCE

1. Universal Health Coverage and National Health Insurance
2. Integration of priority programmes into PHC
3. Human resources for health and PHC
4. Technology, digitisation and innovation for client-focused public health
5. Addressing the social determinants of health and the effects of climate change through partnerships and collaboration
6. Epidemic preparedness and emerging health challenges: building a resilient PHC system fit for the 21st century
7. Supervision, monitoring and evaluation
8. Community participation and the roll of civil society
9. Governance and leadership
10. Health promotion and behaviour change
11. Continuous quality improvement
12. The service delivery platform

## 10. OUTCOMES OF THE CONFERENCE

The output of the conference will be a national declaration on PHC in the context of UHC and NHI, signed by the Minister, Deputy Minister, nine Health MECs, and political representatives of sectors responsible for the broader social, economic and environmental determinants of health which reside beyond the health sector. This commitment should manifest in the Strategic Plans of the health sector for 2024–2029 and Annual Performance Plans (APPs) for 2024–2026, as well as in the national Medium-term Strategic Framework (MTSF) 2024–2029.

Most importantly, the delivery of revitalised PHC services should improve the experiences of care – and ultimately, the health outcomes – of all 60 million South Africans when they utilise the public health sector. The monitoring and evaluation systems of government will seek to find evidence of, among others, the infusion of the resolutions of the National PHC Conference in health sector plans in all spheres of government.

## 11. VENUE

The conference will be held in the Eastern Cape Province. The motivation for this choice is to contribute towards raising the profile of the province, improving the quality of health provided, boosting socio-economic development, and re-affirming that all citizens of South Africa are afforded equal rights to health and wellbeing.

## REFERENCES

1. World Health Organization. The World Health Report 2008: Primary Health Care – Now more than ever. Geneva: WHO; 2008.  
[https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/43949/9789241563734\\_eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/43949/9789241563734_eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

2. The Presidency, Republic of South Africa. Twenty Year Review South Africa 1994–2014. Pretoria: 2014.  
<https://www.dpme.gov.za/news/Documents/20%20Year%20Review.pdf>
  3. South African National Department of Health. District Health Information System (DHIS) data 2022/23, as at 12 July 2023.
  4. South Africa National Department of Health. Programme of Action Report. Pretoria: NDoH; April 2023.
  5. South African National Department of Health. National Health Act, 2003. National Health Insurance Policy Towards Universal Health Coverage. Government Gazette No. 40955, 30 June 2017.
  6. World Health Organization and United Nations Children’s Fund. A vision for Primary Health Care in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Towards universal health coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals. Geneva: WHO & UNICEF; 2018.  
<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/328065/WHO-HIS-SDS-2018.15-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- 

**Produced by:**

**Government**

Ms Jeanette Hunter

Mr Thulani Masilela (DPME)

Mr Ramphelane Morewane

Mr Kgwiti Mahlako

Ms Yvonne Mokgalagadi

Ms Caroline Ngoepe

**with inputs from Health Systems Trust**

Dr Themba Moeti

Ms Ronel Visser

Ms Rakshika Bhana

Mr James Michael Burnett

Ms Judith King