

South Africa

Quarter 2 | April - June 2025

Newsletter

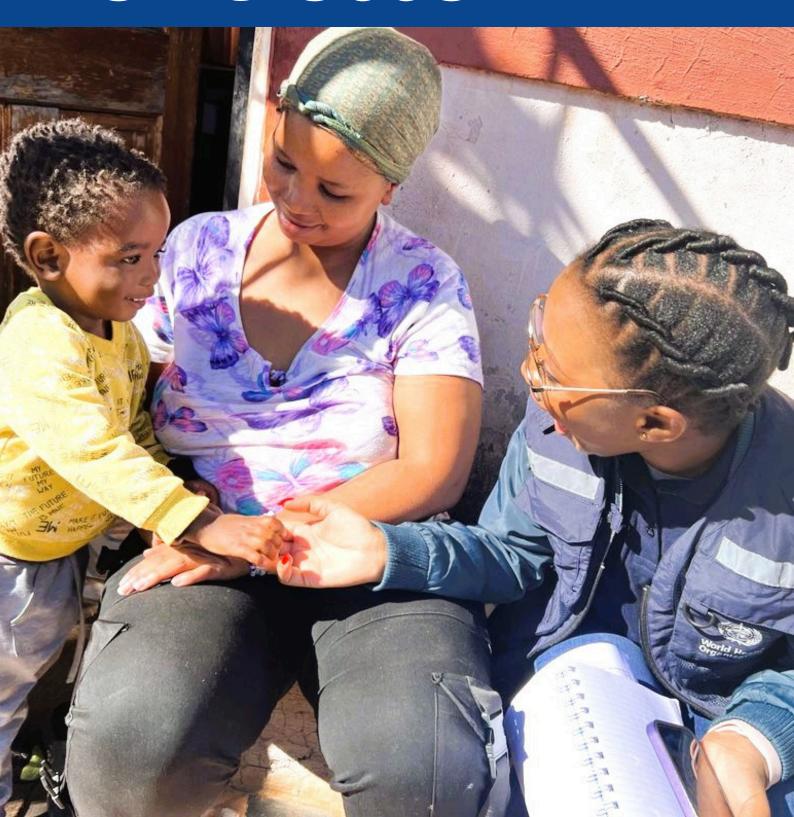


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Foreword

Ms Shenaaz EL-Halabi Country Representative WHO South Africa



As we reflect on the second quarter of 2025, I am deeply encouraged by the collective resolve and commitment demonstrated by our teams, partners, and stakeholders in advancing the public health agenda under often challenging circumstances.

This period has reminded us that progress in health is neither automatic nor easy particularly in a climate marked by constrained resources, competing priorities, and persistent inequalities.

Yet, through resilience, innovation, and unwavering collaboration, we continue to make meaningful strides in strengthening health systems, protecting the vulnerable, and upholding the right to health for all.

From reaffirming our commitment to maternal and child health during World Health Day, to reinforcing our emergency preparedness capacities through provincial simulations and intra-action reviews, to rallying around the fight against tobacco use among youth, each activity reflects our shared dedication to service and impact.

These achievements are not only milestones but also markers of what is possible when we stay the course. They are a testament to the tireless efforts of our staff, the leadership of our government counterparts, and the enduring partnership of communities and civil society.

In these fiscally constrained times, I encourage all of us to continue working with purpose, creativity, and conviction. Let us remain focused on what unites us; our vision of a healthier, safer, and more equitable South Africa.

Thank you for your continued dedication and partnership.



World Health Day 2025: Honouring Mothers, Championing New Beginnings

On 7 April, WHO South Africa, in partnership with the National Department of Health and UN agencies, marked World Health Day under the theme "Healthy Beginnings, Hopeful Futures" — spotlighting the urgent need to prioritize maternal and newborn health.

The country office used the moment to reflect on WHO's legacy since 1948 and celebrate progress toward reducing preventable maternal and newborn deaths. In a vibrant in-house event, staff gathered to cut a commemorative cake and recommit to WHO's mission, especially in support of vulnerable mothers and infants.

To amplify the day's impact, WHO produced a short video series featuring eight heads of UN agencies and senior health officials pledging action for maternal health. These messages flooded social media with bold commitments and heartfelt reflections.

"Ensuring the health and well-being of mothers and newborns is not just a health priority, it is a moral imperative," said Ms. Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO Representative. The celebration also highlighted the reach of initiatives like MomConnect and the Side-by-Side campaign, which continue to engage millions of women with timely health.

"Ensuring the health and wellbeing of mothers and newborns is not just a health priority; it is a moral imperative," ~ Ms El-Halabi

Hear what our partners & UN Heads had to say on World Health Day- Click to watch



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Door-to-Door Health: WHO Boosts NCD Awareness in Butterworth

In the lead-up to World Hypertension Day, WHO South Africa partnered with the Eastern Cape Department of Health and Mnquma Municipality to empower communities through grassroots health promotion.

WHO donated information, education, and communication materials (IE&C) for a door-to-door campaign focused on raising awareness of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), especially hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease across three townships in Mnquma municipality. Community health workers used the materials to educate households and encourage healthy lifestyle changes.

"When local structures are well-resourced and empowered, they become powerful engines for prevention and early intervention," said Dr Joseph Mwangi, WHO Communicable and non-communicable Lead.

The campaign demonstrated how small investments in local systems can yield large public health returns. Local authorities praised the materials for enabling more targeted, impactful outreach.

"These IE&C materials will support our teams in engaging directly with households, sharing practical messages, and encouraging healthier choices," added Mr Itumeleng Setlhare, NCD Programme Manager at the National Department of Health.

As part of the Amplifying Diabetes Awareness, Care and Treatment in South Africa (DACT-SA) project with the NDoH, WHO is supporting community-led NCD campaigns, led by Deputy Minister Dr. Joe Phaahla, to strengthen primary health care, raise awareness, and promote early screening, diagnosis, and treatment for NCDs and mental health.



WHO South Africa Hosts Men's Dialogue on **Mental Health and Masculinity**

As part of activities to mark Men's Mental Health Month, the WHO South Africa Staff Association organized a powerful Men's Dialogue session on 27 June 2025.

The session, led by Dr. Joseph Mwangi, WHO Communicable and non-communicable Lead, brought together male staff members for an open and honest conversation on masculinity, in society and the workplace.

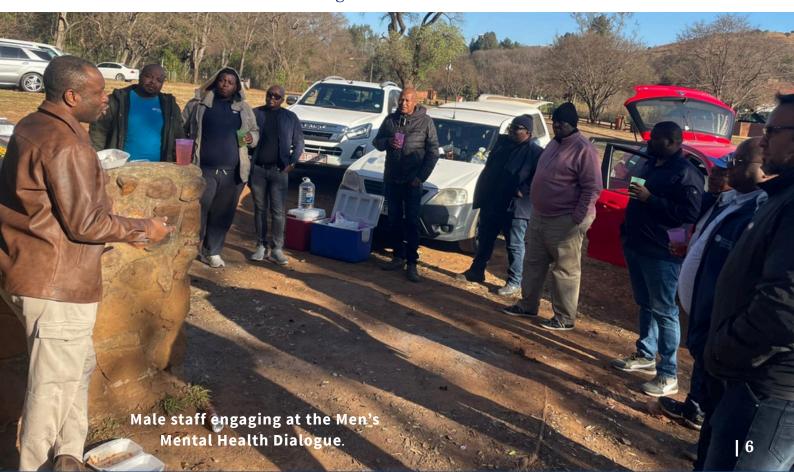
The dialogue created a safe space for men to reflect on their experiences and challenge traditional norms that often discourage vulnerability and emotional expression.

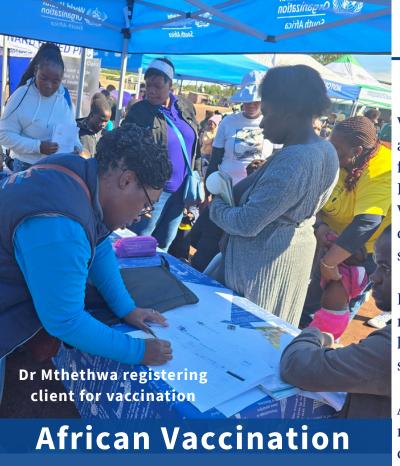
Participants spoke candidly about the importance of owning their emotions, supporting gender equality, and breaking the silence around men's health and wellbeing.

The discussion also emphasized the need to redefine strength not as stoicism or dominance, but as care, presence, and responsibility.

This was not just a conversation, it was a moment of reckoning," said Dr. Mwangi. "We must continue to create environments that allow men to show up fully, to be honest about their struggles, and to embrace healthier, more mental wellbeing, and the evolving role of men balanced expressions of masculinity. It's how we grow stronger as individuals, as teams, and as a community."

> The event underscored WHO South Africa's commitment to staff wellbeing, gender-sensitive programming, and inclusive dialogue. More sessions are planned as part of a broader effort to promote mental health and healthy masculinity within the workplace.





African Vaccination Week: Reaching the Unreached

In April, South Africa reignited its commitment to protecting children through African Vaccination Week (AVW) under the theme "Immunization for All is Humanly Possible."

With routine immunization rates falling and zero-dose children more than doubling since 2022, the week-long campaign focused on

reaching the most underserved.

With technical support from WHO, targeted activities took place in 12 high-risk districts. In five of these including Johannesburg, Ehlanzeni, Bojanala, Dr Kenneth Kaunda, and Fezile Dabi, WHO provided direct assistance through outreach, integrated services, and real-time support.

In total, 4,517 children were vaccinated and more than 7,400 individuals received additional health services including deworming, HIV screening, and flu vaccinations.

A digital campaign amplified pro-vaccine messages and countered misinformation, while community health workers and leaders mobilized families to boost uptake.

"Immunisation is a human right. Everyone has a right to be protected from vaccine-preventable diseases," said Dr Simangele Mthethwa, WHO South Africa Vaccine Preventable Disease Officer.



Standing Up for South Africa's Youth on World No Tobacco Day

On 31 May, WHO South Africa stood side-by-side with the National Department of Health to mark World No Tobacco Day under the global theme "Unmask the Appeal." Held in Midrand, the event mobilized government leaders, youth voices, and civil society to challenge how the tobacco and nicotine industries target young people.

Led by Deputy Minister of Health Dr Joe Phaahla and supported by WHO South Africa Representative Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, the event called for stronger tobacco regulations and a crackdown on flavored e-cigarettes and deceptive marketing.

"Beneath the sweet flavours and sleek packaging lies a bitter truth: addiction, illness, and loss. Tobacco is not a lifestyle—it is a trap," said Ms El-Halabi.



Youth leaders shared powerful testimonies and demanded social media platforms be held accountable for amplifying nicotine product promotions. WHO unveiled new global recommendations urging countries to ban flavors and online promotions that attract youth.







A Mother and a Clinician's Story of Maternal Health and Care in South Africa

In the heart of Pretoria, at FF Ribeiro Clinic, two women, one a hopeful new mother, the other a dedicated midwife cross paths on a journey that reflects the strength, compassion, and challenges of maternal health care in South Africa.

"My name is Lesego Masamola, and this is my first child, and everything about this pregnancy don't feel abandoned." don't feel abandoned." Limpopo, Lesego now lives in Pretoria with her partner. Her voice is calm, but every word carries the weight of hope. "My biggest hope for my child is that she grows in a good environment, with access to everything she needs, especially good healthcare. I want her to have more than I had growing up." receive not just care, be denvironed abandoned." don't feel abandoned." Lesego's reflections ed year's World Health Da beginnings, hopeful fur represents thousands the healthcare system transformative time, we pressures and uncertainty.

She says she felt safe and supported throughout her pregnancy journey, not only by her family but also by the health system. "In South Africa, we have many clinics and hospitals.

It makes it easier to go where you're comfortable and where you find a good environment," she explains. Her gratitude is sincere, but she doesn't overlook the deeper needs. "Pregnancy changes you emotionally and physically. It's new for many of us. So I wish that when we come for appointments, we receive not just care, but therapy too, so we don't feel abandoned."

Lesego's reflections echo the heartbeat of this year's World Health Day theme: Healthy beginnings, hopeful futures. Her story represents thousands of women who navigate the healthcare system during a deeply transformative time, women despite economic pressures and uncertainty, seek healthy beginnings for their children.

A few doors down at the same clinic, Mildred Sisinkie, a clinician in the antenatal department, is juggling between consultations and attending to babies. She pauses only briefly to reflect on her work.

"I'm happy with my job. I love helping these women," she says, her face bright with purpose. But the challenges she faces are just as real.

"Many migrant and refugee patients start their antenatal care late," she explains. "Some are scared because they don't have a passport or ID. Others can't speak English, and we don't always have interpreters. So we improvise, we ask other patients to help us translate."

Despite these obstacles, Mildred has seen the impact of compassionate, immediate care. "I remember a woman who arrived here at 36 weeks, already in labour, no antenatal record. Her blood pressure was dangerously high. We called the hospital immediately and got her transferred. She had an emergency C-section, and both mother and baby made it. A week later, they came back healthy and happy. That's what makes this worth it."

When asked what would help her serve better, Mildred points to the need for language training, digital literacy, and more resources. "If we could learn even basic phrases in languages like French, it would help. And we need more staff. We do our best, but quality care needs time. We rush sometimes, and that's not fair to the mothers."



She also strongly believes in the foundation laid by the country's inclusive policies. "Health is for all," she affirms. "Our laws don't discriminate whether you're a foreigner, refugee, or migrant. Healthcare is free, and we do our best to provide it to everyone." Back in the waiting room, Lesego rests quietly, her hand still on her belly. She smiles when asked what "healthy beginnings" means to her. "It means starting fresh in your mind, in your heart. Planning properly, so everything in your life goes well. Especially when you're doing it for your baby."

WHO works closely with the National Department of Health to strengthen the quality of maternal and newborn health services through technical guidance, health system support, and policy alignment. WHO's contributions include updating clinical guidelines that build frontline health worker capacity, and promoting access to quality care for all populations, including the vulnerable, migrants and refugees.

"Attending all 8 antenatal care (ANC) visits is very important to ensure a healthy pregnancy and a safe delivery, both for the mother and the baby. Mothers, need to be encouraged and supported to attend all clinic visits even after delivery. Families also have a critical role to support her adherence of the scheduled visits", Dr Sithembile Dlamini-Nqeketo, WHO South Africa Reproductive, Maternal, Neonatal, Child & Adolescent health Officer

On this year's World Health Day, the experiences shared highlight the importance of providing quality maternal care to all mothers, regardless of background, status, or language. At FF Ribeiro Clinic in South Africa, the interaction between a midwife and a mother illustrates how health services contribute to building healthy beginnings for both mothers and their children.

Emergency Preparedness and Response





South Africa Launches Pandemic Fund Project to Boost Health Emergency Preparedness

South Africa marked a pivotal moment in its health security journey with the official launch of the Pandemic Fund Project on 24 National Department of Health (NDoH) in collaboration with WHO, UNICEF, and FAO, aims to strengthen the country's capacity to prevent, prepare for, and respond to health emergencies through a holistic One Health approach.

The launch brought together high-level government officials, development partners, and technical experts to reinforce intersectoral collaboration in pandemic preparedness. The event showcased the country's determination to move from reactive crisis response to proactive resilience building, mobilizing over US\$39 million in additional resources on top of the US\$25 million grant from the Pandemic Fund.

"This is a strategic investment in our health security," said Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO South Africa Country Representative. "WHO is proud to support the implementation of the Pandemic Fund initiative by strengthening disease surveillance, rapid response systems, and the health workforce; laying the foundation for a safer and more prepared South Africa."

The project will be delivered through three core workstreams: enhancing surveillance and early warning systems, strengthening laboratory July 2025 in Pretoria. The initiative, led by the networks, and building a skilled and responsive health workforce. These efforts are vital to sustainably balance and optimize the health of people, animals and ecosystems.

> FAO and UNICEF also underscored the power of collective action. "FAO reaffirms its commitment to a holistic One Health approach," noted Dr Babagana Ahmadu, FAO Country Representative.

"We are focused on ensuring that institutions are resilient and ready for future threats." UNICEF Country Representative, Ms Christine Muhigana, emphasized the importance of protecting children during emergencies and ensuring no one is left behind.

The project launch also saw strong commitments from the National Department of Agriculture and the Department of Forestry, Fisheries, and the Environment reflecting the cross-sectoral nature of the One Health vision.

Executive Head of the Pandemic Fund, Ms Priya Basu, lauded South Africa's leadership: "This is a timely and strategic step toward health resilience. We're proud to support this partnership that is catalyzing real, measurable change."



WHO strengthens Gauteng's outbreak response capacity following deadly foodborne illness

In the wake of a foodborne illness outbreak that tragically claimed 30 lives and affected over 850 individuals, WHO South Africa played a pivotal role in helping Gauteng Province transform crisis into capacity.

In June, WHO supported the provincial health authorities to conduct an Intra-Action Review (IAR), bringing together over 60 stakeholders to evaluate and improve the outbreak response.

The review identified key gaps and strengths in coordination, food safety, case management, risk communication, and laboratory systems.

"The IAR has revealed our capacities, strengths, and challenges; it's exactly what we need to strengthen our outbreak response," said Ms Refilwe Motsamai, Acting Chief Director for Public Health Systems. Following the review, WHO provided technical support to revise Gauteng's contingency plan, including the integration of clinician and laboratory networks, improved multilingual public messaging, and targeted training interventions.

"Moving forward, Gauteng Province is better positioned to protect the health of all communities," said Dr Ntsieni Ramalwa-Sekhwama of WHO South Africa Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response Officer.

This effort underscores WHO's role in turning emergency lessons into long-term health system strengthening, and supporting government-led action that saves lives and builds resilience.



WHO boosts provincial readiness through contingency plan testing

Across three provinces in South Africa, WHO is helping turn plans into action, and action into preparedness.

Under the Pandemic Fund grant, WHO South Africa led a series of high-impact contingency planning workshops in Gauteng, Mpumalanga, and KwaZulu-Natal during June 2025, putting provinces to the test with realworld emergency scenarios.

In Gauteng, a week-long workshop co-hosted with the Department of Health, National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD), Jhpiego, and partners focused on high-risk hazards identified during the 2024 STAR workshop.

Using the International Health Regulations (IHR 2005) and WHO's Emergency Preparedness and Response framework, participants reviewed protocols for health emergencies such as cholera outbreaks and climate-related disasters.

This aimed at presenting a roadmap for protecting lives and coordinating response across sectors and access Public Health

Emergency Operations Centre (PHEOC). Further east, Mpumalanga brought together district health officials, IFRC, SAHMS, and the NICD to stress-test their outbreak response systems.

"The proactive testing of our plans is not just an exercise, it's an investment in saving lives when emergencies strike," said Mr. Mandla Zwane, a provincial health official. By the end of the workshop, Mpumalanga had updated its contingency plans, strengthened inter-agency ties, and gained new momentum toward public health resilience.





In KwaZulu-Natal, WHO facilitated a handson simulation at the Public Health Emergency Operations Centre (PHEOC), involving provincial leaders, Jhpiego, and the Disaster Management Centre.

Drills simulated cholera outbreaks and flooding, drawing on real experiences and reinforcing operational readiness. "KwaZulu-Natal has been experiencing a lot of public health emergencies, and this workshop will help us respond better and faster," said Ms. Thembelihle Maphalala, Director of Health Services in iLembe District.

"These workshops are not just about ticking boxes; they're about building trust, strengthening systems, and saving lives," noted Dr Patrick Moonasar, WHO South Africa Emergency Preparedness and Response Programme Officer.

With contingency plans tested, revised, and aligned to global best practices, WHO and its partners have helped lay the groundwork for a faster, smarter response to future emergencies. This is preparedness in action and a major stride toward pandemic resilience for South Africa.



Advancing Pandemic Fund accountability through M&E workshop



In June 2025, WHO South Africa, in collaboration with the National Department of Health, led a three-day Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) workshop in Pretoria to strengthen oversight and accountability for the Pandemic Fund.

Bringing together nearly 30 stakeholders, including UNICEF, FAO, NICD, and Jhpiego. The workshop focused on aligning reporting mechanisms across key priority areas: surveillance, laboratory systems, and human resources for health.

The session produced tangible outcomes, including the establishment of a Technical Working Group, validation of indicators, and agreement on clear next steps.

"It was refreshing to see such collaborative energy. Everyone was fully engaged, which made our outputs all the more meaningful," said Dr. Uche Ikenyei, Strategic Information Officer, WHO South Africa.

The workshop directly supported South Africa's Q2 reporting to the Pandemic Fund and laid the groundwork for sustained, transparent impact tracking. With WHO's technical leadership, the Pandemic Fund is not just a financing tool but a catalyst for measurable improvements in national health security.





WHO and University of Pretoria Strengthen Partnership

WHO South Africa, led by Country Representative Dr Shenaaz El-Halabi, met with Professor Flavia Senkubuge, Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Pretoria (UP) and her team, to strengthen collaboration.

The meeting was part of a broader collaboration between WHO South Africa and the Faculty.

In particular, the focus was also on building stronger country-level partnership with the recently designated WHO Collaborating Centre (CC) for Social Determinants of Health and Promoting Health and Well-being, which is housed within UP's Department of Public Health Medicine.



The WHO CCs are designated institutions by WHO Director General and serve as an extended and integral arm of WHO's capacity to implement its mandated work.

This strengthened partnership will drive greater

contributes to evidence-based solutions and

impact by ensuring that local expertise

Health Medicine.

supports South Africa's health goals through innovation, technical excellence, and collaboration.

WHO and University of Prevoia teams in a group photo.



WHO & NDoH Strengthen Collaboration to Advance Health Priorities

WHO South Africa Country Representative, Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi engaged with the National Department of Health's Primary Health Care team, led by Deputy Director-General Ms Jeanette Rebecca Hunter, to strengthen collaboration in delivering tangible health results for South Africans.

The strategic dialogue focused on joint actions to eliminate malaria, integrate HIV/TB services more efficiently, improve health financing, and bolster disease prevention. These areas are critical to reducing health inequalities and building a more responsive, resilient health system.

The meeting reinforced a shared commitment to advancing Universal Health Coverage (UHC) through concrete, countryled solutions. By aligning technical expertise and resources, WHO and NDoH aim to

accelerate progress on national priorities, ensuring that health interventions reach the communities that need them most, faster and more effectively.





Photo Gallery

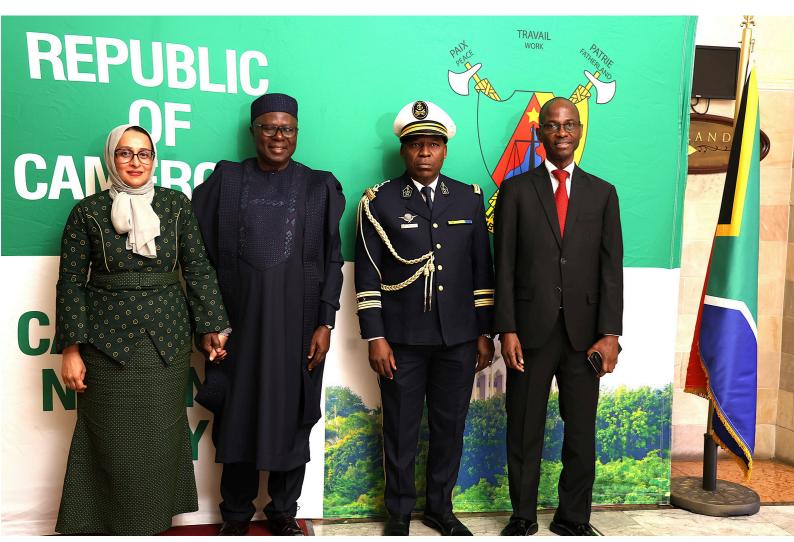




From 2nd left: WHO Representative Ms Shenaaz El-halabi with H.E. Nilvana Darama, Ambassador of Türkiye to South Africa, and staff, during a courtesy call to express appreciation for Türkiye's support



From left: WHO Representative Ms Shenaaz El-halabi with H.E. Faisal Al-Harbi, Ambassador of Saudi Embassy to South Africa during a courtesy to discuss shared health priorities



From left: WHO Representative Ms Shenaaz El-halabi with H.E. Anu'a-Gheyle S Azoh-Mbi, High Commissioner of Cameroon and his team during the 53rd National Day celebration of Republic of Cameroon in South Africa.



From left: Mr Nelson Muffuh, UN Resident Coordinator to South Africa and WHO Representative Ms Shenaaz El-halabi during the 53rd National Day celebration of Republic of Cameroon in South Africa



From left: WHO Representative Ms Shenaaz El-halabi, Mr Lot Mlati, Assistant FAO Representative (Programme) and Ms Christine Muhigana UNICEF Country Representative at a UNCT retreat.



From left: Mr Ramphelane Morewane, Acting Deputy Director-General for HIV/AIDS, TB, and Maternal and Child Health at NDOH receiving a copy of WHO South Africa's Country Cooperation Strategy



From right: WHO Representative Ms Shenaaz El-halabi meeting with Ms Lwazi Manzi from the Presidency to discuss the Presidential Health Compact and WHO's strategic and technical support to advance cross-sector collaboration for improved health outcomes in South Africa



From left: Dr Satoshi Ezoe, Deputy Assistant Minister for Global Health of Japan with WHO Representative Ms Shenaaz El-halabi met at the recent G20 Health Working Group in Johannesburg









Gates Foundation











































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