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Together, we are building a more resilient, responsive, and sustainable health system – one that can deliver today and prepare for tomorrow.

”

Message from WHO South Africa Country Representative



Dear Partners and Colleagues,

This quarter has reminded us that progress in health is built through partnership, persistence, and purpose.

Across provinces, we have witnessed extraordinary examples of collaboration from strengthening primary health care and improving emergency preparedness, to expanding efforts that protect children and communities from preventable diseases.

At the heart of these milestones are people: the health workers who serve with dedication, the mothers and families who inspire change, and the partners who continue to stand with us in pursuit of a healthier, fairer South Africa.

Each story in this newsletter reflects their commitment and courage.

As the World Health Organization, we remain steadfast in supporting South Africa's efforts to build a resilient health system – one that delivers with quality, equity, and compassion.

Let us continue to work together to turn our shared vision of health for all into a daily reality for every community.

Best wishes,
Ms Shenaaz EL-Halabi



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Dr Ghebreyesus commends SA's efforts to fight AIDS

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► **Watch Dr Tedros' message on South Africa's leadership at the SA AIDS Conference 2025**

WHO at the 12th South African AIDS Conference

Under the theme “Unite for Change – Empower Communities and Redefine Priorities for HIV/AIDS”, the 12th South African AIDS Conference gathered over 6000 delegates including government officials, researchers, community members, and international partners at Emperors Palace in Gauteng, from September 8–11, 2025.

Opening the conference, Deputy President Paul Mashatile emphasised the need for bold, collective actions to address South Africa's high HIV burden: underscoring the country's commitment to leading the global response.

In a message of support, WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus praised South Africa's leadership, especially its quick efforts to maintain HIV and TB programs despite global funding cuts.

He commended the rollout of innovative interventions like Lenacapavir, a new long-acting injectable for HIV prevention, and reaffirmed WHO's commitment to reaching the 2030 goal of ending AIDS as a public health threat.

WHO actively supported engagement at the national and provincial levels throughout the conference.

In partnership with South Africa's National Department of Health and provincial health departments, WHO experts took part in technical and satellite sessions focused on expanding prevention, improving treatment adherence, and integrating HIV services into primary health care.

The WHO exhibition stand attracted delegates, showcasing innovations in service delivery, data utilization, and health system strengthening.

The opening plenary, “Re-imagining South Africa's HIV Programme,” also featured Dr Sandile Buthelezi, Director-General of Health, and other national experts who discussed how to accelerate progress toward the 95–95–95 targets through digital solutions, community empowerment, and sustainable financing.

Through ongoing technical assistance at the national and provincial levels, WHO continues to work closely with South Africa to strengthen HIV programs, build resilient health systems, and make progress toward universal health coverage.



Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO South Africa Representative, engaging with Gauteng Provincial Health team during the strategic planning session.

Gauteng leads the way to a more robust and resilient health care system

The World Health Organization collaborated with the Gauteng Department of Health during their Strategic Planning Session on September 17–18, 2025. This partnership aimed to help the province turn its health priorities into clear, measurable goals and to implement long-term reforms. It emphasized WHO's main roles, including providing leadership on health issues, setting evidence-based norms and standards, fostering partnerships for collective action, and building sustainable institutional capacity.

The two-day session brought together provincial leaders, senior managers, and technical partners to align Gauteng's health goals with national priorities. The discussions focused on strengthening primary health care, enhancing governance and system performance, and increasing emergency preparedness and response capabilities.

In her remarks, Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, the WHO Representative to South Africa, praised Gauteng's leadership for integrating resilience and evidence-based practices into its health planning. She emphasized the importance of aligning provincial strategies with the World Health Organization's General Programme of Work 14 (2025–2028), which focuses on advancing universal health coverage, improving health security, and promoting healthier populations.



From left: Ms Nomantu Nkomo-Ralehoko, Gauteng Health MEC and Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO South Africa Representative.

“Building a strong health system requires deliberate planning and collaboration. By combining governance, service delivery, and preparedness, Gauteng is setting an example of how provinces can turn strategies into real, measurable benefits for communities”, she said.

The Gauteng MEC for Health, Ms Nomantu Nkomo-Ralehoko, expressed appreciation for WHO's ongoing technical support and stressed the role of strategic planning in driving better health outcomes. “We are grateful to WHO for walking this journey with us,” she said. “This process helps us focus our efforts where they matter most—strengthening systems, improving access, and ensuring quality care for every resident of Gauteng.”

Through the support of The Pandemic Fund, WHO is helping strengthen South Africa's public health emergency preparedness through training and technical support for Emergency Operations Centres by reinforcing resilient health systems aligned with national priorities.

South Africa prepares to lead in global TB vaccine readiness

In a historic milestone for public health, South Africa held its inaugural national TB Vaccine Preparedness Workshop, marking an important step in the country's readiness to roll out a future tuberculosis (TB) vaccine.

The two-day workshop was organized by the National Department of Health (NDoH) in partnership with the World Health Organization. It brought together national and provincial health officials, policymakers, researchers, civil society, and international partners to create a coordinated plan for TB vaccine deployment covering regulatory processes, supply chain readiness, training, policy development, and community engagement.

Opening the discussion, Dr Sandile Buthelezi, Director-General of Health, emphasized the urgency of early action. "We are not waiting for the vaccine to arrive to start preparing," he said. "Our goal is to ensure that when it comes, South Africa is ready in our systems, our policies, and our communities."

The workshop underlined the importance of strong multisectoral coordination, reliable data systems, and public engagement to guarantee equitable access once the TB vaccine becomes available.

In his keynote address at the closing ceremony, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, Minister of Health, described the event as "a threshold of one of the most significant advances in public health since the discovery of antibiotics against TB." He called for science, solidarity, and shared commitment to protect the millions affected by tuberculosis each year.

Adding, Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO South Africa Representative highlighted the global impact of an effective TB vaccine. "WHO estimates that a TB vaccine that is 50% effective could prevent up to 76 million cases and 8.5 million deaths globally over 25 years," she said. "These numbers represent real lives, mothers, children, workers, learners and a significant social and economic gain."

The workshop reaffirmed South Africa's leadership in the global TB response and outlined next steps to strengthen national readiness, with WHO's technical support and NDoH's commitment to equitable access.



Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, Minister of Health and officials at the TB vaccine preparedness workshop.



Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO South Africa Country Representative, engaging with partners at the TB vaccine preparedness workshop



Partners and government officials in a group photo at the TB vaccine preparedness workshop.



From left: Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO South Africa Representative, Prof Adrian Puren, Executive Director of NICD and Dr Anban Pillay, Deputy Director General at the NDOH unveiling the WHO Polio Reference and Redistribution Center



Front view of the WHO Polio Reference and Redistribution Center at NICD in Johannesburg

Africa enhances disease preparedness with new WHO polio reference and redistribution center

Africa has reached a major milestone in health security with the opening of the WHO Polio Reference and Redistribution Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa, a state-of-the-art facility that strengthens the continent's capacity for disease detection, preparedness, and rapid response.

Established through a partnership between the World Health Organization, South Africa's National Department of Health (NDoH), and the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the center improves the operational capacity of the Global Polio Laboratory Network (GPLN) in Africa.

For years, laboratories across Africa faced delays in acquiring essential reagents and diagnostic supplies, which hampered outbreak detection and response. This new facility directly addresses those challenges by serving as a central hub for storing and redistributing vital laboratory materials. It ensures the timely delivery of reagents and supplies to national laboratories enabling faster, more coordinated responses to polio and other infectious diseases.

"This facility is more than just a building; it is a symbol of Africa's commitment to science, collaboration, and self-reliance," said Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO Representative to South Africa. "By making sure that our laboratories are well equipped and connected, we are protecting the health and future of our continent."

Prof Adrian Puren, Executive Director of NICD, emphasized the practical impact: "This redistribution centre enhances Africa's ability to detect, prepare for, and respond to outbreaks quickly and accurately. It marks real progress toward a polio-free Africa."

The center will serve all GPLN-accredited polio laboratories in the region and will be closely connected with national and provincial public health institutes.

WHO's support strengthens operational readiness, supply chains, and rapid response – building on polio investments to enhance Africa's capacity for disease surveillance, emergency preparedness, and global health security.



Officials cutting the ribbon for the WHO Polio Reference and Redistribution Center.



Officials in a group photo at the WHO Polio Reference and Redistribution Center.



Officials during a tour at the WHO Polio Reference & Redistribution Center during a tour.



An official from the NDOH illustrating to mothers breastfeeding position at the Loftus Park.

Prioritize breastfeeding: Building sustainable support systems for every mother

Songs of celebration, vibrant colours, and mothers holding their babies set the mood at Loftus Park in Pretoria during this year's World Breastfeeding Week. Held under the theme "Prioritize Breastfeeding: Create Sustainable Support Systems," the event was led by the National Department of Health in South Africa, in partnership with WHO and UNICEF.

The gathering highlighted breastfeeding as both a health priority and a shared social responsibility. Addressing participants, Lesley Bamford, Acting Chief Director for Child and Maternal Health, emphasized that exclusive breastfeeding remains one of the most effective ways to ensure child survival and development.

"Mothers can only do this when they are fully supported at home, at work, and in their communities," she said. Despite its benefits, only 22% of infants under six months are exclusively breastfed in South Africa, down from 32% in 2016, according to the 2024 Food and Nutrition Security Survey. This decline jeopardizes progress toward the Sustainable Development Goal target of 50%.

In a joint statement, Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO Representative to South Africa, and Ms Christine Muhigana, UNICEF Representative, reaffirmed the urgency of action.

"Breastfeeding is a baby's first vaccine, safeguarding them from illness and aiding brain development. Sustainable support systems ensure that mothers receive help when and where they need it—at work, at home, and in their communities".

WHO is collaborating with provincial health departments to enhance capacity for maternal and child health, including training healthcare workers, supporting baby-friendly health facilities, and advocating for workplace policies that promote breastfeeding. By strengthening provincial programs, WHO ensures that services reach mothers and infants equitably.

This year's campaign engaged families, communities, employers, and healthcare workers to make breastfeeding practical and accessible.





From left: Dr Hiiti Sillo (Unit Head, Regulation and Safety, Department of Regulation and Prequalification, WHO), Dr Boitumelo Semete-Makotlela (CEO, SAHPRA), Ms Nomantu Nkomo-Ralehoko (Member of the Executive Council, Gauteng Province), Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi (WHO South Africa Representative), Dr Anban Pillay (Deputy Director General at the National Department of Health in South Africa), and Prof Ju Tabane (Adjunct Professor, University of Botswana)

South Africa takes bold steps to protect citizens from fake and substandard medicines

South Africa has taken a bold step to protect its people with the launch of the National Action Plan (NAP) against substandard and falsified medical products. Announced on 30 September 2025 in Johannesburg, the plan strengthens the country's ability to ensure that only safe, quality-assured medicines reach patients.

The initiative, led by the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) in partnership with the National Department of Health and the World Health Organization, brought together regulators, law enforcement, and health partners in a united effort to protect lives.

Officially launched by Minister of Health Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi, the plan underscores South Africa's leadership in confronting a growing global threat. "Fake medicines hit the poorest the hardest," he said. "No single entity can win this fight alone. South Africa is ready to lead but we succeed together."

“South Africa's National Action Plan sets a strong precedent for the region proving that when government, regulators, and communities unite, we can safeguard public health and build lasting trust.

~ Ms Shenaaz EL-Halabi,
WHO South Africa Representative

"This launch is more than a milestone, it's a lifeline for our people," said Dr Boitumelo Semete-Makotlela, CEO of SAHPRA. "The plan will not only eliminate fake products but also empower communities to become protectors of health."

WHO Representative Ms. Shenaaz El-Halabi reaffirmed WHO's support, noting that the plan is as much about trust as it is about safety. "When a mother gives medicine to her child, she should do so knowing it is safe, effective, and real," she said.

South Africa celebrates African traditional medicine day with national commemoration

On 29 August 2025, South Africa marked African Traditional Medicine Day with a vibrant national commemoration in Moruleng, Moses Kotane Local Municipality, reaffirming its commitment to integrating traditional medicine into the national health system. The event was attended by Deputy Minister of Health Dr Joe Phaahla, the Chairperson of the Interim Traditional Medicine Practitioners Council, traditional health practitioners, and other dignitaries.

African Traditional Medicine Day, celebrated annually on 31 August, commemorates the landmark resolution adopted in 2000 by African health ministers during the 50th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. The day recognizes the vital role of traditional medicine in providing accessible, affordable, and culturally rooted health care to millions across the continent. Read more [🔗](#)

“Bringing traditional medicine into the mainstream of healthcare, appropriately, effectively and above all, safely, based on the latest scientific evidence, can help bridge access gaps for millions worldwide. It would be an important step toward people-centred and holistic approaches to health and well-being.

~ Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus,
WHO Director-General



Honouring tradition in Moruleng, South Africa, the sacred cleansing ritual of Mphepho sets the tone for the commemorations



Group photo of some traditional health practitioners together with staff of WHO and NDOH

Enhancing NCD care with traditional health practitioners

In many South African communities, Traditional Health Practitioners (THPs) are not only healers but also trusted advisors, first responders, and cultural custodians. Recognizing their vital role, WHO partnered with the North West Provincial Department of Health to train THPs and community health workers on preventing and managing noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).

The five-day workshop concentrated on hypertension, diabetes, and cancer while improving referral pathways and communication links between traditional and formal health systems. Participants acquired practical knowledge on early detection, lifestyle counseling, and patient guidance. Dr Joseph Mwangi, Lead for NCDs at WHO South Africa, emphasized the strategic importance of this approach.

“Traditional health practitioners are pillars of community health. By equipping them with accurate information and linking them with the formal health system, we ensure that every person, especially in rural areas can access timely care and support.”, Dr Mwangi said.

Adding, Dr Andrew Diniso, Provincial NCD Manager for the North West Department of Health, highlighted the benefits for patient outcomes. “Traditional healers often see patients first. When they identify warning signs and refer early, we reduce complications and save lives.”

For participants, the training validated and expanded their role in community wellness. A traditional healer from Mahikeng reflected: “We are learning how our traditional knowledge can work with modern medicine. If we understand diseases like high blood pressure or diabetes better, we can guide our patients to seek help in time.”

Dr Joseph Mwangi also noted that the supportive policy framework of South Africa’s Traditional Health Practitioners Act ensures sustainable integration. By combining WHO’s technical expertise with local knowledge, the partnership strengthens community-based NCD care and demonstrates that health systems thrive through collaboration.

He said, “This collaboration shows that no one should be left behind in the fight against NCDs. When modern medicine and traditional practice work together, communities become stronger and lives are saved”.

Enhancing health security at South Africa's seaports

As part of Pandemic Fund-supported activities, the World Health Organization provided technical leadership in strengthening health security capacities at South Africa's seaports.

From 6–10 October 2025, officials from major ports gathered in Durban for a capacity-building workshop on International Health Regulations (IHR) Core Capacities and ship inspection, and the issuance of ship sanitation certificates.

The workshop, led by the National Department of Health and the Border Management Authority, featured WHO-facilitated sessions on public health risk assessment, ship sanitation, and emergency response simulation.

The exercise tested and updated the Durban Harbour Public Health Emergency Contingency Plan, reinforcing South Africa's readiness to detect and respond to health threats at its borders.



Some border management authority officials during the training



A group photo of border management authority officials during the training



From left: Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO South Africa Representative with His Excellency Wu Peng, Ambassador of China to South Africa

Strengthening partnerships for improved health

Over the past quarter, WHO South Africa has continued to deepen partnerships that advance shared public health goals and strengthen South Africa’s health system.

In a courtesy meeting with His Excellency Ambassador Wu Peng of China, WHO reaffirmed collaboration with China in support of South Africa’s health priorities. The engagement highlighted the importance of mutual cooperation and the shared commitment to achieving better health outcomes for all.

Further strengthening the link between innovation and health, WHO South Africa also engaged with Vodacom executives, Mr Mike Serame and Mrs Mashudu Ndou. Discussions explored opportunities to collaborate on digital health solutions that can expand access, improve service delivery, and ultimately enhance the well-being of communities across the country.



From middle to right: Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO South Africa Representative with officials from Vodacom



WHO staff and officials from Vodacom

Another important milestone was the Health Partners Forum (HPF), held on 26 August 2025 at the British High Commissioner's residence in Pretoria. Co-chaired by WHO South Africa and the British High Commission, the meeting convened more than 30 participants from government, diplomatic missions, development partners, philanthropic organizations, and the private sector.

Discussions focused on mobilizing sustainable financing, improving coordination, and building resilience in South Africa's health system. The National Department of Health shared updates on strategic financing, digital health, and progress towards National Health Insurance, while partners highlighted their commitments in areas such as HIV, TB, maternal and child health, and pandemic preparedness.

Participants welcomed the HPF as a trusted space for dialogue and collaboration, underscoring the importance of aligning all support with national strategies and ensuring accountability.

WHO acknowledged the strategic leadership of the NDOH and the contributions of international and local partners who continue to play a vital role in strengthening South Africa's health system.



Snapshots from partner engagements



Heads of UN Agencies with Minister of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Ms Maropene Lydia Ramokgopa (middle) during United Nations Country Team's retreat



WHO team and Statistics South Africa during a meeting to strengthen collaboration on quality population health data that informs policy and improves health outcomes.



From left: Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi WHO South Africa Representative with Mr Risenga Maluleke, Statistician-General of Statistics South Africa to strengthen collaboration on quality population health data that informs policy and improves health outcomes.



WHO South Africa Representative, Ms Shenaz El-Halabi with speakers at the opening of the 10th Southern Africa Malaria Research Conference hosted at Future Africa, University of Pretoria.



WHO South Africa Representative, Ms Shenaz El-Halabi met with Dr Mpho Roberta Masondo (middle), Chairing Director of the African National Healers Association and her team to explore collaboration in traditional medicine and the safe use of organic and natural products in line with WHO's Traditional Medicine Strategy, public health goals, and national priorities.



WHO South Africa Representative, Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi met with officials from the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa to advance collaboration on strengthening public health workforce.



Ms Shenaaz El-Halabi, WHO South Africa Representative welcomed a delegation from the Health Systems Trust led by interim CEO Prof Salome Maswime during a courtesy visit to discuss strengthening collaboration on health systems development.

Staff celebrates Heritage Day



Acknowledgements



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