

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals health targets in South Africa

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) health targets in South Africa (SA) demands a coordinated and multisectoral approach across all nine provinces, 52 districts and 250 sub-districts. These interconnected SDG health targets address various aspects of health and wellbeing.

The realisation of SDG 3 health targets in SA faces several challenges that are complex and interconnected, requiring a multifaceted and sustained effort for resolution. Among these challenges are the high burden of disease; inequalities in health; shortage of skilled healthcare professionals, particularly in rural and underserved areas; insufficient healthcare infrastructure, including facilities and equipment—especially in the public sector; stigma surrounding mental health issues; inadequate support for mental health and substance users; social determinants of health (SDH) and limited health literacy.

To address these challenges, a concerted effort from the government, healthcare providers, communities and international partners is required. A sustainable and inclusive strategy that considers SDH is essential for advancing towards the achievement of SDG health targets in SA. Furthermore, embracing health technologies like telemedicine could help tackle challenges such as the scarcity of human resources in healthcare. This could be facilitated by working towards attaining universal health coverage, ensuring that every citizen has access to essential health services without financial hardship. Prioritising the implementation of dedicated programmes for vulnerable populations, such as the homeless population and adolescents, addressing their specific health needs and challenges, is imperative. This would require a shift from hospicentric care by reinforcing primary healthcare to provide comprehensive and integrated care that focuses on preventive measures, health promotion and behavioural intervention.

Additionally, achieving this shift would demand a Health in All Policies approach, based on multistakeholder engagements facilitated through a platform for continuous communication and coordination. Such a platform could assist in reviewing and aligning national health policies with the SDG health targets. It would help identify gaps and update policies to effectively reflect the SDG framework by ensuring that these policies are evidence-based, context-specific and address the SDH.

Moreover, it is essential to reassess the dataset currently used for monitoring Department of Health (DoH) activities. The National

Department of Health uses a set of indicators, the National Indicator Data Set (NIDS), for this purpose.^[1] All health facilities and non-facility health services in SA are required to collect, use and report on NIDS. The NIDS contains 389 data elements and 225 indicators, all collected through the District Health Information System. These elements are classified into input, process, output, outcome and impact levels, and are further grouped into various categories, such as infectious diseases, immunisation, maternal, neonatal, child, nutrition and women health, non-communicable diseases, mental and oral health, health systems, rehabilitation and ward-based primary healthcare outreach teams. The DoH should conduct a comprehensive assessment of these health data elements and indicators, ensuring their alignment with SDG targets and developing benchmark values such as the number of premature mortalities due to non-communicable diseases related to SDG 3.4. This may require converging on the outcome and impact level indicators. This process could be facilitated by investing in evidence-based healthcare research, which, in turn, would drive innovation and evidence-based decision-making in the health sector.

Finally, engaging communities in health planning and decision-making, coupled with promoting health literacy to empower individuals in managing their health and wellbeing, is key to that process. Achieving the SDG targets is feasible. However, it requires sustained effort, collaboration, a commitment to addressing SDH and entrusting responsibilities to experts in population medicine such as public health physicians. Regular assessment and adjustments to the plan based on evolving challenges and opportunities will be crucial for achieving the SDG health targets in SA.

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1. Department of Health. National Indicator Data Set 2023. <https://dd.dhmis.org/app/data-ElementDetail.html?view=de&deid=X1d4L2l6W1k&syncid=X1d4L2l6W1k&isnew=false&file=NIDS%20Integrated&source=nids> (accessed 01 December 2023).
2. District Health Information System. DHIS2 Overview. <https://dhis2.org/> (accessed 01 December 2023).

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