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South African
Learning Alliance for the DHS

BRIEFING NOTE

An introduction to South Africa's District Health System (DHS)

> The DHS is the foundation of South Africa's public health system and the platform for delivering primary health care (PHC). It exists to:

Provide promotive, preventive, curative and rehabilitative services

Bring health governance closer to users and communities

Implement change and generate bottom-up innovation

The legal basis for the DHS

In South Africa, the National Health Act of 2003 formally established the DHS as the most decentralised public governance structure for an equitable, PHC-based health system.

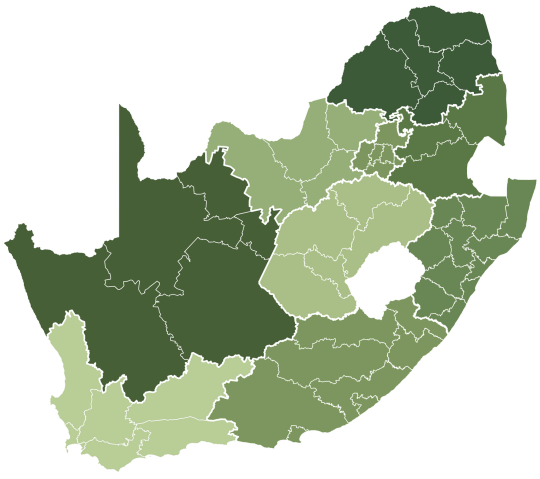
The National Health Act settled years of uncertainty about the respective roles of provinces and local government, eventually assigning responsibility for the DHS to provinces. Local government remains responsible for municipal health services, defined as non-personal environmental health services and disease surveillance, although some metros still provide PHC services.

Health district boundaries follow those of district and metropolitan municipalities. Policy also provides for district health councils, community health committees and district hospital boards.

How the DHS is organised

9	**Provinces**, responsible for delivering PHC through the DHS
52	**Health districts**, each with a management team and a district health plan
240	**Sub-districts**, which provide the day-to-day management of PHC services

Frontline services, including clinics, community health centres, district hospitals, ward-based PHC outreach teams and school health services



Map of South Africa's nine provinces and 52 health districts

The DHS platform is vital for implementing necessary change and generating bottom-up innovations within the health system. Learning from existing sub-national experience is crucial for strengthening the DHS to manage current crises and embed it as the foundation of PHC and Universal Health Coverage in South Africa. While challenges vary by district and province, requiring tailored responses, there is significant activity across settings from which all can learn.

How the DHS developed

Under apartheid, the health system was fragmented, hospital-centric and inequitable. Since 1994, the DHS has developed through three distinct periods.

1994 - 2000
Laying the foundations

1994 National Health Plan commits to a DHS

1996 First DHS policy adopted

1997 White Paper on health system transformation

1999 District Health Information System adopted nationally

2000 Local government boundaries settled, cutting districts from 157 to 53

2001 - 2009
Legislation and HIV

2003 National Health Act passed, clarifying roles, boundaries and governance

2004 HIV treatment programme begins, with its own funding, monitoring and lines of authority

HIV response draws attention from wider DHS strengthening

Real PHC spending grows, supporting more equitable district financing

2010 - 2020 (and beyond)
PHC and NHI reform

2010 10-point plan and PHC re-engineering: outreach teams, school health, clinical specialist teams

2012 11 National Health Insurance (NHI) pilot districts

2013 Ideal Clinic programme

2014 First DHS Policy Framework and Strategy

2019 NHI Bill tabled

2023 NHI Act passed

Why the DHS matters now

The need for new paradigms of integrated service delivery, intersectoral collaboration, and a greater orientation towards health promotion, disease prevention, health and wellness.

Renewed recognition of the importance of engaging communities, the public, patients and frontline providers in the co-creation of health and wellness.

NHI reforms require strengthening of district- and sub-district-level structures like 'Contracting Units for Primary Health Care' and District Health Management Offices.

Multiple intersecting crises, including COVID-19, climate change, socio-economic vulnerability and reduced budgets, necessitate new ways of working within health systems.

GET IN TOUCH

Learn more through SALAD, the South African Learning Alliance for the DHS: **SALADLearning@gmail.com**

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Sources: Whyle E, et al. S Afr Med J 2026;116(5):e3215. SALAD. About the DHS. Map boundaries: South African Municipal Demarcation Board, via OCHA and geoBoundaries (CC BY 3.0 IGO).