

White Paper

Building Leadership and Governance for Effective Health System Finance in South Africa

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Please complete the following table. The assignment mark will be adjusted according to the contribution percentage shared here.

Name	Surname	Student Number	Contribution (Up to 25% - 4 group members)
	Chen	2425207	Discussed how the leadership and governance building blocks can be implemented in the South African context.
Blessings	Chabi	2539524	Identify and describe the key components of effective leadership and governance for financing the health system in South Africa. As well as proof reading and editing.
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			Focusing on challenges and examples for context
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Abbreviations:

AGSA - Auditor-General of South Africa
ASSAf - Academy of Science of South Africa
e-Procurement - Electronic Procurement
NDP - National Development Plan
NHI - National Health Insurance
OHSC - Office of Health Standards Compliance
SIU - Special Investigating Unit
WHO - World Health Organization

INTRODUCTION

Effective leadership and governance are essential foundations for strengthening health system financing in South Africa. Leadership provides direction, vision, and accountability, while governance ensures transparency, equity, and efficient resource allocation across all levels of the health sector (World Health Organization, 2007). In the context of South Africa, health system financing remains a significant challenge due to persistent inequities between the public and private sectors, limited fiscal space, and inefficiencies in financial management (McIntyre and Ataguba, 2012). The quality of leadership and governance directly influences how financial resources are mobilised, distributed, and utilised to achieve equitable access to health services.

The South African health system is characterised by complex financing mechanisms that reflect both historical and structural inequalities. Despite substantial government investment, the public sector continues to face challenges such as underfunding, poor accountability, and weak leadership capacity (Coovadia et al., 2009). In contrast, the private sector, which serves a smaller portion of the population, commands a disproportionately large share of financial resources (Ataguba et al., 2018). These disparities highlight the urgent need for stronger leadership and governance systems that can promote financial sustainability, accountability, and equity within the national health system.

The purpose of this white paper is to examine how effective leadership and governance can strengthen health system financing in South Africa. It explores the key components of leadership and governance as health system building blocks, analyses their role in promoting financial accountability and efficiency, and proposes evidence-based strategies for improvement. The paper also draws on lessons from other countries that have successfully implemented leadership and governance reforms to enhance their health financing systems. Ultimately, this white paper seeks to provide practical insights for policymakers, health managers, and stakeholders working towards building a more sustainable, equitable, and well-governed health financing system in South Africa.

Part 2: The Building Blocks of Effective Leadership and Governance

Key Building Blocks of Effective Leadership and Governance

Effective leadership and governance is fundamental for a sustainable health financing system in South Africa. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines leadership and governance as ensuring that strategic policy frameworks exist and are combined with effective oversight, union-building, regulation, and accountability (WHO, 2025). These elements represent the essential structure upon which equitable, efficient, and responsive health financing systems are built. In the South African context, where the National Health Insurance (NHI) transition presents an unprecedented opportunity for reform, implementing these governance building blocks is critically important for advancing towards universal health coverage (ASSAf, 2024).

The first essential building block is strategic policy frameworks with a clear vision and mission alignment. Health financing systems require a unified public value vision that articulates mandates and objectives across governance levels. The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf, 2024) identified that the absence of coherent public value mission has contributed significantly to failure in governance and resource inefficiencies. South Africa's National Development Plan provides a comprehensive universal health coverage vision, yet provincial and district implementation often lacks alignment on how financing activities translate policy into practice. Successful frameworks establish clear hierarchies of decision-making, define roles and responsibilities, and ensure policies are operationalized through consistent legal instruments cascading from national to local levels (ASSAf, 2024; WHO, 2025).

Transparency and accountability mechanisms form the second building block.

Accountable governance requires both procedural quality and effective management of stakeholder relationships and output quality, meaning responsibility to monitor and deliver health outcomes (WHO, 2025). South Africa's health system has experienced substantial accountability failures; between 2009-2013, approximately R24 billion in provincial health expenditure was classified as irregular or wasteful (Michel, 2020). Without transparent processes in procurement, resource allocation, and performance reporting stakeholders cannot assess whether financing is effectively improving population health. When stakeholders access health financing information such as budget allocations, service delivery outcomes, and cost-effectiveness they are empowered to hold the system accountable (ASSAf, 2024; Michel, 2020).

Stakeholder engagement and union-building constitute the third building block.

Effective health financing requires coordination among government at all levels, public and private healthcare providers, civil society, and communities. Research demonstrates that stakeholder participation in financing decisions improves policy implementation and reflects actual population needs (Masefield et al., 2021). However, South African experience reveals that engagement is often characterised by tokenism and limited power for local-level stakeholders. This effective engagement requires transparent identification of stakeholders, clear communication of how input is used, feedback mechanisms demonstrating impact, and genuine participation opportunities for community health workers and civil society organisations representing vulnerable populations (ASSAf, 2024; Masefield et al., 2021).

Regulatory frameworks and quality assurance systems form the fourth building block. Governance requires clear legal structures defining powers and limitations of health system participants. South Africa's National Health Act (2003) provides a foundational legal framework, yet translating this into operational guidelines and quality standards remains incomplete (ASSAf, 2024; WCGDH, 2020). Regulatory frameworks must address standard-setting, provider credentialing, and service quality monitoring. The Office of Health Standards Compliance (OHSC) has insufficient capacity relative to system size (WCGDH, 2020). Strong

regulatory frameworks protect public interest by establishing minimum provider standards and enabling purchasers to contract with confidence that accredited providers deliver quality services (WHO, 2025).

The appropriate delegation of authority across governance levels constitutes the fifth building block. Health financing systems must specify which decisions are made at national, provincial, district, and facility levels, with corresponding decision-making authority and financial resources (WCGDH, 2020). South Africa's Constitution calls for decentralised management, yet provincial and district authorities often lack genuine autonomy over key financing decisions, creating accountability without power (WHO, 2025). For there to be effective delegation it requires that decisions be assigned based on realistic capacity assessment, that resources follow responsibilities, and that balances between central coordination (medicines procurement, equity) and local responsiveness be maintained (ASSAf, 2024; WCGDH, 2020).

Finally, participatory governance and anti-corruption measures complete the essential building blocks framework. Beyond policy consultation, communities, health workers, and civil society require meaningful roles in ongoing financing and service delivery decisions through representation in facility committees and district health councils (Masefield et al., 2021). In addition, effective governance requires clear policies prohibiting corrupt practices, transparent procurement, robust internal controls, swift investigation of allegations, and whistle-blower protection. The Academy of Science of South Africa's 2024 report identified corruption as pervasive in both the public and private sectors, often facilitated by weak consequence management (ASSAf, 2024).

These six building blocks, strategic frameworks, transparency and accountability, stakeholder engagement, regulatory systems, appropriate delegation, participatory governance, and anti-corruption measures, all work together to create the institutional environment for health financing decisions. For South Africa, implementing these building blocks comprehensively represents essential groundwork for successful NHI implementation and achievement of universal health coverage (WHO, 2025; ASSAf, 2024).

Implementing leadership and governance building blocks in South Africa

The effective implementation of leadership and governance building blocks within South Africa's health system necessitates a multi-faceted approach that directly addresses deep institutional challenges. A foundational step involves the cultivation of ethical leadership to counteract systemic corruption and rebuild public trust, which has been profoundly damaged by repeated misconduct. The pervasive issue of corruption and unethical practices has eroded confidence in public institutions, underscoring the critical need for public managers to take active steps in fostering an ethical environment. This can be achieved by restructuring public organisations, developing protected whistleblowing mechanisms to prevent corruption, and the systematic integration of integrity into all governmental operations. The mandatory delivery of integrity training for public officials is crucial for regaining confidence and ensuring that health services are delivered effectively and accountably (Enaifoghe et al., 2023).

Progress in South Africa's health system requires not only rectifying past failures but also implementing a forward-looking leadership model is essential. The concept of "responsible leadership" offers a promising framework well-suited to the needs of the public sector and a developmental state (Jonck, 2024). This leadership style moves beyond traditional models by prioritising sustainable value creation, enforcing rigorous accountability, and maintaining a deeply relational engagement with all stakeholders, both internal and external to the organisation (Jonck, 2024). It is consistent with principles of accountability, reliable moral decision-making, and answerability for decisions (Jonck, 2024). For South Africa, adopting this approach can support policy makers and public sector leaders to successfully advance the objectives of the National Development Plan (NDP) by creating a shared sense of purpose and drive meaningful, sustainable and responsible change (Jonck, 2024).

Lastly, strategic implementation must extend to the national and international levels. Domestically, this involves formalising the role of traditional leadership within the development landscape, and ensuring their meaningful participation in socioeconomic development initiatives, as outlined in government planning frameworks ("Traditional affairs | South African Government," n.d.). Internationally, South Africa's upcoming G20 Presidency presents a strategic opportunity to advocate for a restructuring of global economic governance (APRI, 2024). This leadership position enables the nation to advocate for progressive debt management solutions and equitable sustainable investment frameworks that directly support nations across Africa. By doing so, South Africa can help shape a more supportive external economic climate, which is a critical determinant for securing stable and adequate long-term health financing (APRI, 2024)

Building block implementation

Evidence from global studies underscores the importance of strategic investment, leadership, and public support in enhancing health system performance. In Kyrgyzstan, Gaitonde et al. (2016) found that reducing healthcare costs for the public and increasing salaries for healthcare workers significantly decreased corruption within the system. This suggests that financial equity and fair compensation are critical levers for institutional integrity.

Reich et al. (2016) examined Vancouver's response to health crises such as Ebola and highlighted the role of strong leadership in ensuring adherence to sustainable health governance goals. Their findings emphasize that resilient leadership structures are essential for navigating emergencies effectively.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities in resource allocation. Mannelli (2020) reported that although Italy typically maintained a well-resourced healthcare system, the unprecedented demand for COVID-specific resources led to severe shortages. This case illustrates the need for dynamic and responsive resource planning, even in robust systems.

Soumerai et al. (2015) acknowledged that while no dataset is perfect, health data has been successfully used over the past three decades to guide vaccine prioritization and strengthen health education. This highlights the value of evidence-informed decision-making, even amid data limitations.

Finally, Jensen and Naumann (2016) demonstrated that public support plays a pivotal role in the long-term success and quality of healthcare systems. Trust and engagement from the population not only sustain policy implementation but also enhance service delivery outcomes.

Together, these studies affirm that ethical leadership, adequate resources, reliable data, and public trust are foundational to building resilient and equitable health systems.

Part 3: Strategies for Building Effective Leadership and Governance in South Africa

Challenges in Leadership and Governance

Post-apartheid South Africa has made efforts to improve governance, yet persistent leadership instability, weak accountability, and political interference continue to hinder progress in the health sector. Many senior management positions remain in “acting” capacities, and frequent leadership changes such as Gauteng’s ten heads of health in ten years, have eroded continuity and institutional memory (ASSAf, 2024). Overlapping political and administrative roles foster patronage and undermine merit-based appointments, while poor oversight and opaque decision-making limit accountability. Corruption, including high-profile procurement scandals and threats to whistle-blowers, has further damaged public trust and diverted resources from patient care (ASSAf, 2024). Ethical lapses and weak governance have also contributed to low staff morale and declining service quality (Rispel et al., 2019). The governance in South Africa’s public health sector remains inconsistent and fragile, posing major risks to the success of key reforms such as the National Health Insurance (ASSAf, 2024).

Strategies for Building Effective Leadership and Governance

Strengthening leadership and governance in South Africa’s health sector will require comprehensive, coordinated, and sustained efforts. Drawing on the best international practices and local expert recommendations, several key strategies can be pursued to build more effective and accountable leadership structures.

Establish a Clear Strategic Vision:

A unifying strategic vision is essential for aligning all stakeholders toward shared national health goals. Leaders at national and provincial levels should articulate a coherent, long-term strategy that integrates health and development priorities, providing a common reference point against which progress can be measured (ASSAf, 2024). A clearly defined vision helps focus collective efforts, promotes policy coherence, and strengthens accountability across all tiers of the health system.

Strengthen Policy and Legislative Frameworks:

Effective governance depends on robust and transparent institutional frameworks. Updating and refining laws, regulations, and policies to clarify roles, responsibilities, and reporting

mechanisms at each level of government is critical (ASSAf, 2024). This includes safeguarding governance structures from political interference and promoting stability through merit-based appointments. Strong legal frameworks empower institutional leadership while embedding checks and balances to prevent misuse of power.

Ensure Merit-Based Appointments and Build Capacity:

Developing a capable and ethical leadership cadre is fundamental to improving governance. Managers and executives should be appointed based on merit, qualifications, and performance, not political loyalty (ASSAf, 2024). South Africa should professionalise the civil service, particularly in health management, by enforcing standards that prioritise expertise and integrity. Concurrently, leadership development and continuous training must be institutionalised through mentorship programmes, management courses, and partnerships with academic institutions. The WHO (2025) underscores that strong leadership capacity enables effective planning, implementation, and evaluation of health strategies.

Improve Transparency and Accountability Mechanisms:

Robust accountability systems are essential to ensure that leaders answer for their decisions and performance. Strengthening internal audit functions, publishing health outcomes and expenditure reports, and empowering independent watchdogs can enhance oversight (WHO, 2025). Performance agreements for senior officials with clear targets and consequences for underperformance further reinforce accountability. Moreover, promoting open and competitive procurement processes can reduce fraud and build public trust. A culture of transparency should be normalised, where data and decisions are shared openly with the public and civil society.

Enhance Stakeholder Participation:

Inclusive governance improves both the legitimacy and effectiveness of decisions. Community members, healthcare workers, and civil society should have meaningful opportunities to participate in planning, monitoring, and evaluation. The WHO (2025) advocates for inclusive coalitions involving patients, providers, and the private sector to strengthen health governance. In South Africa, participatory structures such as hospital boards and health committees must be revitalised and their input taken seriously. According to ASSAf (2024), genuine community participation ensures that health policies reflect lived realities and local needs, fostering consensus and shared accountability.

Combat Corruption and Promote Ethical Leadership:

Ethical governance is impossible without addressing corruption decisively. Preventive measures such as digital procurement systems, transparent recruitment, and rigorous financial oversight should be complemented by strong punitive action against offenders (ASSAf, 2024). Protecting whistle-blowers and enforcing the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2020–2030) can help entrench integrity in the public sector. By modelling ethical behaviour and taking swift action against misconduct, leaders set a moral standard for the entire system.

Provide Supportive Systems for Leaders and Managers:

Even skilled leaders require supportive environments to function effectively. Health managers must have access to adequate resources, reliable data, and clear operational frameworks (ASSAf, 2024). Strengthening information systems and budgeting processes empowers leaders to make evidence-based decisions. Cultivating a positive organisational culture that

values teamwork, innovation, and continuous learning can also enhance leadership performance. As noted by ASSAf (2024), effective leaders “build teams and attend to the relationships that make complex systems work.” Regular leadership forums and peer-learning platforms can further enhance collective problem-solving and institutional resilience.

Potential Challenges and Opportunities in Implementation

A central challenge in strengthening governance is political interference. The persistent practice of appointing officials based on loyalty rather than competence undermines accountability and weakens institutional stability (ASSAf, 2024). Reforming this culture demands political will, stronger legal safeguards, and a shift toward valuing professional integrity over patronage. Leaders who promote transparency often face resistance or intimidation, further complicating reform efforts.

Affirmative action policies, though vital for addressing historical injustices, sometimes complicate the implementation of merit-based recruitment. In some cases, they may prioritise representativeness over performance, inadvertently undermining efficiency (Nkgapele et al., 2024). The challenge lies in balancing social equity with professional competence. To reconcile these goals, equity initiatives should be paired with targeted capacity-building programmes such as mentorship and management training to ensure that transformation strengthens rather than weakens institutional performance.

Another constraint is the shortage of skilled managers and technical experts, particularly at district level (Malakoane et al., 2020). Leadership capacity gaps will limit the implementation of governance frameworks and reduce the system’s adaptability. Furthermore, resource constraints will hinder the adoption of digital accountability tools such as e-procurement systems and real-time monitoring. Addressing these challenges requires long-term investment in training, mentorship, and information systems even within a constrained fiscal environment.

South Africa’s fragmented governance structure further complicates reform. Overlapping responsibilities between national, provincial, and district levels result in inefficiencies, duplication, and blurred accountability (Rispel et al., 2019). Clarifying institutional roles and strengthening coordination mechanisms are essential to improve coherence and ensure efficient use of resources.

In addition, the anti-corruption framework suffers from duplication and weak coordination among oversight agencies such as the Public Protector, the Hawks, and the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) (Pepingco, 2020). Although the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) plays a proactive role in identifying irregular expenditures, limited resources and overlapping mandates constrain effective enforcement. Clearer institutional mandates and better inter-agency coordination are needed to target corruption within the health sector specifically. Strengthening collaboration between oversight bodies and provincial health departments can improve transparency, fiscal discipline, and public confidence.

Despite these obstacles, there are considerable opportunities for reform. Professionalising the public service, embracing digital transformation, and embedding ethical leadership can cultivate a performance-driven culture. Frameworks such as the National Development Plan (NDP) and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2020–2030) provide strong policy foundations for this transformation. Leveraging these frameworks can align leadership reforms

with national priorities, restore public trust, and promote sustainable improvement in health governance.

These Strategies Can Lead to More Effective Health System Financing

Implementing these governance and leadership reforms can significantly strengthen South Africa's health system financing. Improved leadership and governance serve as enabling conditions for efficient resource use, effective programme delivery, and sustainable financial management.

Strengthening Financial Discipline through Stable Leadership: Frequent leadership changes undermine long-term financial planning and accountability. When leaders are appointed based on competence and performance, they are more likely to provide stability, strategic vision, and effective resource stewardship. Consistent leadership supports medium- and long-term financial planning, risk management, and the prioritisation of essential health services.

Reducing Corruption and Financial Leakages: Weak governance directly contributes to irregular expenditure and loss of public funds. The AGSA reported that from 2018 to 2023, 68% of irregular expenditure in government stemmed from procurement non-compliance, totalling R46.25 billion (ASSAf, 2024). Reforms such as digital procurement systems, strengthened audits, and whistle-blower protections can reduce these leakages. Transparent systems ensure that resources are channelled toward service delivery rather than corruption or inefficiency.

Enhancing Coordination for Better Resource Allocation: Effective governance ensures that financial decisions are guided by public health priorities rather than political considerations. Improved coordination and clarified roles between national, provincial, and district health departments promote equitable and efficient distribution of resources. This is particularly important under the NHI, where pooled funds must be strategically managed to ensure fairness and maximum impact.

Leveraging Data for Evidence-Based Financial Decisions:

Leadership development, when paired with robust information systems, enhances evidence-based decision-making. Reliable data allow managers to identify inefficiencies, monitor performance, and allocate funds to high-impact interventions. Yet, the AGSA 23/24 found that 80% of health departments had material issues with the reliability of their performance reports (ASSAf, 2024). Strengthening governance to ensure data accuracy will improve fiscal efficiency and value-for-money.

Building Public Trust to Support Sustainable Revenue Mobilisation:

Good governance builds trust, an essential condition for sustainable financing. Citizens are more willing to contribute through taxes or NHI levies when they believe funds are managed ethically. Transparent and accountable financial management also attracts donor confidence

and international investment. Thus, improving governance not only ensures the efficient use of existing resources but also facilitates future revenue mobilisation.

Effective leadership and governance are the cornerstones of a well-functioning and financially sustainable health system. By institutionalising merit-based leadership, enhancing transparency, strengthening accountability, and promoting inclusive participation, South Africa can improve financial discipline, restore public trust, and ensure that every rand invested in health delivers measurable benefits to the population.

Conclusion

Strengthening leadership and governance is essential for building a sustainable, equitable, and efficient health financing system in South Africa. This white paper has shown that effective leadership and governance are not only administrative functions but also crucial drivers of accountability, ethical stewardship, and system resilience. The analysis highlighted six core building blocks that form the foundation of sound health system financing. These include strategic policy frameworks, transparency and accountability mechanisms, stakeholder engagement, regulatory systems, appropriate delegation of authority, and participatory governance supported by anti-corruption measures (ASSAf, 2024; World Health Organization, 2025). When these elements are effectively implemented, they can improve institutional performance by strengthening decision-making processes, ensuring oversight, and restoring public trust.

The strategies discussed, such as ensuring merit-based appointments, strengthening policy and legal frameworks, encouraging stakeholder participation, and promoting responsible and ethical leadership, provide a practical roadmap for reform. When properly applied, these strategies can create a culture of integrity and professionalism within the public health sector. They will also contribute to stable leadership, improved fiscal management, and the reduction of corruption, ensuring that health resources are used efficiently and equitably (Jonck, 2024; Enaifoghe et al., 2023). In addition, investing in leadership development and evidence-based governance can enhance coordination across national, provincial, and district levels, promote transparency, and increase responsiveness to the needs of communities (ASSAf, 2024).

The potential impact of implementing these measures is considerable. A well-governed health financing system will help South Africa move closer to achieving universal health coverage by improving efficiency, accountability, and equity. Ethical and transparent leadership will also strengthen donor confidence and support sustainable revenue mobilisation, which are necessary for long-term system stability (Michel et al., 2020). Ultimately, building effective leadership and governance is an investment in fairness, resilience, and public trust. By institutionalising these principles, South Africa can ensure that every rand allocated to health care produces tangible improvements in health outcomes, service quality, and social wellbeing.

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