

Economic development is a team sport

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More than ever, economic development, growth and prosperity is a team sport. No single organisation or government entity can successfully implement development programmes alone. Communities that have successful economic development programmes in place also have highly functional public-private partnerships in place. These partnerships have one goal, to help create the environment where new and existing business can grow and prosper.

As our country moves towards the implementation of the National Health Insurance (NHI), public-private partnerships would help advance the aims of NHI, which are to create universal healthcare coverage for all the country's citizens, by improving the public healthcare system and giving all citizens access to the level of care currently reserved for those able to afford private treatment.

What are public-private partnerships?

Public-private partnerships are contractual relationships between a public authority – usually a local government – and a private company. They may involve a variety of activities ranging from designing a facility or financing its construction to operations, maintenance, management and funding.

Recently, our community experienced the perfect example of a successful public-private partnership, when the national department of health launched a human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination campaign to ensure teenage girls get vaccinated against cervical cancer. Afrilink Healthcare was able to partner with the Tshwane

District Health to assist them roll out the campaign within the given time frames and ensure that targets are reached.

Afrilink Healthcare's vision is to transform workplace, township and rural healthcare. Its core focus is on primary healthcare, with the main objective of assessing risk by encouraging comprehensive wellness screening and ensuring that people are educated and empowered about their health conditions – especially regarding the four main types of non-communicable diseases: cardiovascular diseases (heart attacks and strokes), cancers, chronic respiratory diseases (chronic obstructed pulmonary disease and asthma) and diabetes.

Afrilink Healthcare's business strategy is in line with the NHI as well as the National Development Plan.

The vaccine is most effective when given to girls between the age of 12 to 18. This vaccination is the simplest and most effective way of protecting young women from strains of the HPV virus which cause more than 70% of cervical cancer.

This will reduce the risk of young women developing cervical cancer and save lives. Women usually do not even know they have been infected because they have no symptoms.

But for some women, the virus can lead to the development of cancer.

The virus is transmitted through sexual intercourse. But it is recommended girls have the vaccine whether they are sexually active or not. The vaccine does not protect against all HPV infections and cancer experts say it is important that women have a cervical cancer screening test at least every two years.

Through the partnership between the City of Tshwane and Afrilink, the coverage of the HPV vaccination campaign has been really encouraging. This is a classic example of how the public-private partnership is intended to work.

The HPV project was proof that the public sector and the private sector can work cooperatively and combine resources to expand our community's economic base and provide the opportunity for a company to expand, create new jobs, and prosper.

If healthcare were like any other commodity in the market, we could say that people should pay for what they demand and have what they pay for. However, because good health is desirable for society as a whole and access to quality healthcare is essential to address the current inequality.

When public-private partnerships are in place, the community reaps the benefits of new investments and creation of new jobs, and additional revenues flow into both the private and public sectors. As communities and as a nation, we will indeed make South African a healthy nation.

Our country, like many other developing countries, has both private and public health sectors co-existing.

Currently, the private healthcare system, when compared with the public system, accounts for the largest share of total healthcare financing (comprising both medical schemes and private out-of-pocket payments).

According to World Bank research, private medical schemes cover more than 16% of the population but account for about 45% of total healthcare financing.

General tax revenue that makes up about 40% of total finance is used to cater for about 84% of the population that depend entirely on the public sector for all health services. Privately insured South Africans are also faced with additional out-of-pocket payments. For example, on average R10 000 is being spent for medical aid for a family of three, while only about R1 900 was spent per individual dependent on the public sector.

This skewed distribution of resources is not limited to financial resources. In terms of human resources for the health sector, about 79% of doctors work in the private sector. This maldistribution of resources between the public and private health sectors, relative to the population that each serves, reflects inefficiencies and inequities that has driven government to implement the NHI.

As we implement the NHI during the next 14 years, public-private partnerships will allow communities to capture some of the many important private-sector benefits.

Indeed, private financing can reduce public debt; and private operation, maintenance and management can improve efficiency. The private sector can provide technology and expertise otherwise unavailable to the public sector or a higher level of quality of services.

Private-sector operations can also get things done more quickly than government agencies because they are better equipped to do so.

Our ability, as Afrilink HealthCare, is to formulate public-private partnerships to assist the NHI implementation that will help give our country a competitive advantage in the game of healthcare provision.

If we are to succeed at the economic rebirth of our healthcare sector, we must create full partnership between the public sector and private sector.

By Boitumelo Ntsoane in City Press