



## Functions and Minimum Standards for National Reference Laboratories in the SADC Region



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## ***The capacities and resources of national reference laboratories must be enhanced to improve the control of communicable diseases in the SADC region.***

### **The Background**

Communicable diseases – particularly HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis (TB) and malaria – are major causes of morbidity and mortality in the SADC region. In addition, emerging and re-emerging diseases add to the burden on health.

Laboratory services are at the forefront of responses to the major communicable diseases and emerging diseases, but that their development has lagged behind other aspects of health care delivery.

### **The Rationale**

National reference laboratories are at the pinnacle of diagnostic service provision. The diagnosis and management of communicable diseases require reliable and efficient laboratory services. Those services need to provide reliable and accurate diagnoses that can lead to prompt and appropriate treatment, and they should support treatment monitoring.

These laboratories are vital for diagnosis, disease surveillance and the statistical analysis of epidemiological data. However, when the SADC Secretariat assessed the capacities of national reference laboratories in the SADC region to fulfil their functions, it identified important gaps, many of them systemic. The deficiencies in laboratory services are now seen as obstacles hindering efforts to control communicable diseases. In response, a set of minimum standards for national reference laboratories in the SADC region have been developed.

### **The Principles**

The basis for the minimum standards is the SADC Protocol on Health's requirement that Member States cooperate in the management of communicable diseases. The provision of effective laboratory services cannot be achieved quickly. Long-term planning is required to ensure that certain milestones can be achieved within a specified timeframe. Those would vary between Member States, some of which already have policies and strategic plans in place, while others still have to develop them.

### **The Scope**

The recommendations are wide in scope and are intended to accommodate different levels of laboratory service development. They include descriptions of the roles that should be carried out by national reference laboratories, as well as certain minimum standards which the laboratories should achieve and maintain. In outlining the roles, functions and minimum standards of national reference laboratories, the report proposes benchmarks and provides a reference template that can guide Member States as they strengthen their diagnostic and public health capacities, and pursue the harmonisation of services.

### **Key Points**

In order to improve the operations of national reference laboratories, a common redefinition of the expected roles, functions and minimum standards is proposed. Minimum standards are proposed relating to premises, the people working in them, policies that guide operations, the equipment and other tools of the trade, competency in their use, quality management, health and safety practices, mechanisms for the communication of test results, and the availability of financial resources. The operationalisation of national reference laboratories are to be monitored using indicators that are in line with other SADC indicators. All this is to be achieved by ensuring adequate allocations of appropriate human resources, operational logistics and financial support. Greater financial support to laboratories is called for, in line with the Maputo Declaration provisions and other SADC recommendations, which require that between 7% and 10% of national health budgets should be allocated to laboratory services.

### **Implementation**

SADC Ministers of Health are expected to oversee and monitor the implementation of the minimum standards, while Member States will provide national reference laboratories with operational policy frameworks that fit national requirements. Member States will need to assign the necessary resources for these undertakings, particularly infrastructure, human, resources and finance. Current monitoring and evaluation processes will be adapted to the regional laboratory context.

The SADC Secretariat will establish a laboratory coordination mechanism to streamline its support for laboratory services, while the World Health Organization will be expected to provide technical support and advice, and assist in resource mobilisation and in meeting training and human resource needs.

### **More Information**

The full details are available in the publication, *Functions and Minimum Standards for National Reference Laboratories in the SADC Region (2010)*. *The minimum standards are based on findings detailed in the publication, Assessment Report on National Reference Laboratories in the SADC Region (2010)*. Both publications are available from the **Communicable Diseases Project of the SADC Secretariat (Private Bag 0095, Gaborone, Botswana)**.