
Reflections of ART policy and its implementation: Rebuilding the ship as we sail?

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the early experience with ART implementation in South Africa in the light of the policy goals of increasing ART access whilst improving prevention and strengthening the public health system. It reviews evidence on the state of ART roll-out and suggests that achievements to date have been significant, even if unevenly distributed and not meeting the set targets. The paper then considers what may be important future challenges - ensuring sustainable financing, addressing health system weaknesses (especially those related to human resources), building integrated systems of care and prevention, and developing appropriate national stewardship of the programme. Dealing with these challenges will be essential, both for building equitable ART access and leveraging wider benefits from the large investments in ART.

The decision by the South African government to make antiretroviral therapy (ART) universally accessible represents, from a budgetary point of view, one of the most significant social policies of the “post-transition” era.¹ It is the product of intense international and national pressure and as part of a wave of similar decisions in developing countries across the world.

The first tangible signs that government was considering wider ART access came in August 2003, when a Joint Health and Treasury Task Team presented its findings on the costs of such an initiative to Cabinet (NDoH 2003a). On the basis of this report, a new Task Team was mandated to draw up an implementation strategy for universal access to ART in the context of the existing state responses to HIV/AIDS. This team produced the *Operational Plan for Comprehensive HIV and AIDS Care, Management and Treatment for South Africa* (NDoH 2003b, hereafter referred to as the *Comprehensive Plan* or the *Comprehensive Programme*), which was approved by cabinet in November 2003. In April 2004, after a national site accreditation process, the public sector ART programme was formally launched.

¹ By “post transition” I mean the era following the first two terms of government (which could be regarded as post-apartheid or transitional), during which time the general features of the South African state, governance structures and processes of public policy-making were defined and consolidated.

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