

SANAC NEWS



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The SANAC CEO on a Global Stage



SANAC CEO Dr. Thembisile Xulu participated in the 55th Global Fund Board Meeting (B55), held in Geneva from 6–10 July 2026, a high-level governance and strategic meeting where Global Fund Board members, donor countries, implementing countries, civil society, technical partners, and private sector representatives discussed how the Global Fund should adapt to a rapidly changing global health financing environment.



Nelson Dlamini

Welcome to the July 2026 edition of SANAC News.

This issue reflects a defining moment in South Africa's response to HIV, TB and broader social development challenges. Across the country, government, civil society, communities, researchers, development partners and the private sector continue to demonstrate that collaboration remains our most powerful tool in advancing health, dignity and social justice.

Among the highlights in this edition is South Africa's historic launch of the national rollout of lenacapavir, a groundbreaking long-acting HIV prevention intervention that offers new hope in our efforts to reduce new HIV infections and expand prevention choices. We also preface this edition with a powerful image of the SANAC CEO Dr Thembisile Xulu on the global stage at the 55th Global Fund Board Meeting in Geneva, where critical discussions are shaping the future of global health financing, country ownership and resilient health systems.

Tuberculosis remains a major focus of our national response, and this edition captures renewed momentum through the 9th South African TB Conference and the relaunch of the Mpumalanga Provincial TB Caucus. These engagements reaffirm the importance of political leadership, scientific innovation, accountability and community mobilisation in the journey

towards ending TB as a public health threat.

The voices and aspirations of young people also feature prominently throughout this issue. From the Empowerment Youth Week Dialogue to the Youth at the Centre engagement, a clear message emerged: investing in young people's health, wellbeing, safety and economic empowerment is essential to building a stronger and more inclusive South Africa.

You will also find coverage of SANAC's continued advocacy for evidence-based and rights-centred approaches to public health, including support for the launch of Africa's first coalition advocating for the decriminalisation of drugs for personal use, as well as an important message from the SANAC Civil Society Forum on ensuring a safe initiation season.

As we navigate a rapidly changing health and development landscape, these stories remind us that progress is possible when we work together, embrace innovation and remain committed to leaving no one behind.

HAPPY READING!

Nelson



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South Africa Renews Commitment at the 9th SA TB Conference

- *Karabo Makgato*



SANAC Chairperson Deputy President Paul Mashatile delivering the keynote address at the closing plenary of the 9th SA TB Conference

More than 1,000 delegates from government, academia, research institutions, civil society, the private sector, labour, and development partners gathered at the Birchwood Hotel & OR Tambo Conference Centre in Boksburg from 8–11 June 2026 for the 9th South African Tuberculosis (TB) Conference.

Hosted under the theme “Vuka! Let’s Unite Towards a TB-Free World!”, the conference served as a vital platform to reflect on South Africa’s progress against tuberculosis while galvanising renewed action to accelerate efforts to end TB as a public health threat.

As South Africa continues to grapple with one of the world’s highest TB burdens, the conference provided a timely platform for renewed commitment, innovation and collaboration in the fight against the disease. While significant gains have been made over the past decade, tuberculosis remains one of the leading causes of illness and death in the country, particularly among vulnerable populations and people living with HIV.

Opening the conference, Minister of Health Dr Aaron Motsoaledi acknowledged the considerable burden TB continues to place on South Africa. “Progress is not enough if thousands of South Africans continue to die from a disease that is preventable and curable,” he said. “The next phase of South Africa’s TB response must be bolder, smarter, more integrated, more people-centred, and more accountable than ever before.”

According to figures presented during the conference, South Africa recorded an estimated 249,000 new TB cases in 2024, approximately 14,000 cases of drug-resistant TB, and more than 54,000 TB-related deaths. More than half of all people diagnosed with TB are also living with HIV, highlighting the continued challenge of TB/HIV co-infection.

Despite these challenges, the conference highlighted encouraging progress. Since 2015, South Africa has achieved a 61% reduction in TB incidence, surpassing the World Health Organization’s 2025 milestone ahead of schedule. Treatment coverage has increased significantly, while new innovations in diagnostics, treatment and prevention continue to strengthen the national response.

Professor Mohlopheni Marakalala, Chairperson of the 9th SA TB Conference and Unit Director at the South African Medical Research Council’s Centre for Tuberculosis Research, emphasised the importance of collaboration and African-led solutions. “While scientific advances, policy reforms and community-based interventions have brought us closer to our goals, much work still needs to be done,” he said. “This is a call for us to rise together and show resilience as we march towards an envisioned TB-free world.”

Over four days, delegates engaged in robust discussions across multiple conference tracks, including Basic and Clinical Science, Epidemiological and Operational Research, Prevention and Vaccines, Sustainability and Human Rights, as well as Patient and Civil Society Mobilisation and Advocacy.

The conference showcased cutting-edge research and innovations aimed at strengthening TB prevention, diagnosis and treatment. Discussions highlighted South Africa’s leadership in adopting advanced diagnostic technologies, including Targeted Next-Generation Sequencing for drug-resistant TB and preparations for the introduction of near-point-of-care molecular testing technologies. Delegates also explored progress in vaccine development, with growing optimism surrounding several TB vaccine candidates currently in late-stage clinical development. South Africa has already



Delegates at the 9th SA TB Conference



Gauteng Provincial CSF Chairperson Ms. Gladys Tshabalala and Limpopo Provincial Chairperson Dr. Kholofelo Monyela at the 9th SA TB Conference

begun preparing for the rapid introduction of new vaccines once approved for use.

A key focus of the conference was the implementation of the National End TB Plan 1.0, launched by the Department of Health to accelerate progress towards ending TB by 2035. Minister Motsoaledi outlined several achievements supporting the plan's pillars, including the testing of more than 3.2 million people for TB through the national End TB Campaign, expanded community screening programmes, improved laboratory systems and the successful rollout of shorter treatment regimens for drug-resistant and drug-susceptible TB.

The conference also highlighted the importance of addressing the social and economic drivers of TB. Despite improvements in treatment and diagnosis, an estimated 56% of TB-affected households continue to experience catastrophic costs associated with illness, transport, loss of income and caregiving responsibilities.

Recognising these realities, delegates welcomed stronger collaboration between the health sector and the Department of Social Development to improve social protection, nutrition support, psychosocial services and community-based interventions.

Addressing delegates during the closing plenary on 11 June, Deputy President Paul Mashatile, in his capacity as Chairperson of SANAC, reflected on South Africa's TB journey and called for renewed unity in the fight against the disease.

"Our history in the response to HIV and TB reminds us that disjointed responses prolong epidemics, while collective action bends the curve of history. The progress since the integration of our TB/HIV strategies, community-driven care and innovations in diagnostics and treatment proves that unity delivers results," said the Deputy President.

Deputy President Mashatile highlighted SANAC's role in strengthening multisectoral coordination through initiatives such as the TB Technical Task Team and the establishment of technical working groups aimed at

accelerating implementation of key priorities.

He also welcomed the launch of the public-facing End TB Dashboard, which enables communities, researchers and policymakers to monitor progress, identify gaps and support evidence-based interventions. As the conference ended, delegates were reminded that ending TB requires more than scientific breakthroughs and policy commitments. It demands sustained leadership, community ownership, accountability and collective action.

Deputy President Mashatile urged all stakeholders to turn conference recommendations into measurable action, strengthen TB service delivery, address barriers to care, improve TB/HIV integration and scale up innovative approaches to prevention and treatment. "TB is preventable, curable and beatable," he said. "Each advancement confirms that the pursuit of a TB-free world is a tangible reality we are actively creating today."



SANAC Executive Manager Dr. Rogerio Phili (extreme right) was the Chairperson of Track 4 which focused on Sustainability and TB Policies. He is pictured here with other committee members.

President Ramaphosa launches national rollout of lenacapavir for HIV prevention

- Simangaliso Motsepe



The President of the Republic of South Africa Cyril Ramaphosa delivering the keynote address at the launch of Lenacapavir

South Africa reached a historic milestone in its response to the HIV epidemic when President Cyril Ramaphosa officially launched the national rollout of Lenacapavir, a long-acting HIV prevention injection, on 5 June 2026 at the Lilian Ngoyi Stadium in Secunda, Mpumalanga.

The launch marks a new chapter in the country's HIV prevention programme, introducing an innovative biomedical intervention that strengthens South Africa's comprehensive HIV prevention strategy and reinforces its commitment to ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030.

Lenacapavir is a breakthrough antiretroviral medicine designed to prevent HIV infection by stopping the virus from multiplying in the body. Unlike daily oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), Lenacapavir is administered through just two injections per year, providing an effective and convenient HIV prevention option for HIV-negative individuals, particularly those who prefer a long-acting alternative.

Addressing thousands of attendees at the launch, President Ramaphosa described the introduction of Lenacapavir as a defining moment in South Africa's HIV response. "To us, Lenacapavir is not just a medicine or a drug; it represents a major turning point in South Africa's national story. It is the triumph of science over despair and the power of innovation to save lives," the President said.

He noted that the new prevention option offers renewed hope for young women, families and communities most affected by HIV while acknowledging South Africa's continued progress in building the world's largest HIV treatment programme and expanding access to life-saving medicines.

The President, however, cautioned that Lenacapavir is not a standalone solution. "Let us be clear: Lenacapavir is not a silver bullet. It is one more powerful tool in our arsenal. It complements HIV testing, oral PrEP, treatment as prevention, condoms, voluntary medical male circumcision and behavioural interventions."

He further emphasised that the success of the programme will depend on collective action. "Success will still depend on education. Success will still depend on responsibility. Success will still depend on ending stigma and discrimination. Most importantly, success will depend on all of us," said President Ramaphosa.

The national rollout forms part of an ambitious prevention programme that will initially be available at 360 public health facilities across six provinces and 24 high HIV-burden districts. Government aims to reach nearly one million people by the end of 2027, with plans to expand access to approximately three million people over the next three years.

The rollout is supported through a R1.3 billion partnership between the South African Government, the Global Fund and the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, together with national government funding. The initiative also reflects South Africa's commitment to expanding equitable access to life-saving medicines while strengthening local pharmaceutical manufacturing and long-term health security.

Speaking on behalf of civil society, SANAC Civil Society Forum (CSF) Chairperson, Bab Solly Nduku, reaffirmed civil society's commitment to ensuring that communities benefit from this important scientific



President Cyril Ramaphosa and Minister of Health Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi at the LEN Launch



SANAC Civil Society Leadership at the Lenacapavir launch in Mpumalanga

advancement.

“As civil society, we remain committed to supporting demand creation, community education, advocacy, accountability and meaningful community engagement. We will continue to work alongside government, development partners, the private sector and communities to ensure that this innovation translates into real impact on the ground.”

A particularly symbolic moment during the launch was when Jane Mndebele, a 21-year-old from eMbalenhle, became the first person in South Africa to receive the Lenacapavir injection at Extension 19 Clinic. Her participation marked the beginning of a new era in HIV prevention and offered hope to millions of South Africans, particularly adolescent girls and young women who continue to experience a disproportionate burden of new HIV infections.

The introduction of Lenacapavir builds on South Africa’s longstanding commitment to evidence-based HIV prevention and demonstrates the country’s willingness to embrace scientific innovation in the fight against HIV. Importantly, it expands prevention choices, empowering individuals to select options that best suit their lifestyles while supporting adherence and improving health outcomes.

The successful launch also underscores the importance of sustained collaboration between government, civil society, development partners, researchers, healthcare workers, the private sector and communities. This partnership has been central to South Africa’s HIV response and remains essential to achieving the country’s prevention targets.



Lenacapavir launch

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SANAC Civil Society Forum (CSF) Chairperson, Bab Solly Nduku,

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Deputy President Mashatile Rallies Private Sector to Strengthen South Africa's HIV and TB Response

- Karabo Makgato

The South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) took a significant step towards strengthening multisectoral collaboration in the fight against HIV, tuberculosis (TB) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) when Deputy President Paul Mashatile, in his capacity as Chairperson of SANAC, met with private sector captains of industry at Aspen Pharmacare in Woodmead, Johannesburg, on 4 June 2026.

Hosted under the SANAC Private Sector Forum (PSF), the high-level engagement brought together leaders from government and the business sector to explore innovative solutions for sustaining South Africa's HIV and TB response amid growing funding challenges.

Addressing the gathering, Deputy President Mashatile described the meeting as more than a stakeholder engagement, calling it "a call to action" and an opportunity to strengthen collaboration between government and business to improve the lives of millions of South Africans.

The Deputy President highlighted the interconnectedness of health and economic growth, noting that a healthy workforce is essential for productivity, innovation and sustainable development. "We have made remarkable progress in our response to HIV and TB over the past two decades, yet we know that much work remains to be done," he said.

The engagement came at a critical time for South Africa's HIV response, following the withdrawal of significant United States



SANAC Chairperson Paul Mashatile delivering the keynote address at the meeting with Captains of Industry

government funding support. This has created substantial service delivery and financing gaps that threaten to reverse hard-won gains in HIV prevention, treatment and care.

SANAC CEO Dr Thembisile Xulu presented a compelling case for increased private sector participation, emphasising that the HIV epidemic is not only a public health issue but also an economic challenge with direct implications for workforce productivity and business sustainability.

Dr Xulu highlighted that South Africa is currently facing a funding gap exceeding R7 billion, alongside significant losses in health workforce capacity and community-based services. "The choice before us is clear," Dr Xulu said. "We can absorb the rising costs of inaction, or invest now in sustaining a healthy, productive workforce and a stable economy."

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SANAC CEO Dr Thembisile Xulu



SANAC CEO Dr Thembisile Xulu speaking at the meeting with the Deputy President and Captains of Industry

She further warned that without replacement funding and sustained interventions; South Africa could experience up to 296,000 additional HIV infections and as many as 65,000 additional AIDS-related deaths by 2028.

To address this challenge, SANAC introduced the Coordinated Donor Fund, a transparent and jointly governed financing mechanism designed to mobilise resources from both public and private sectors while ensuring accountability and measurable impact.

Launch of the SANAC Private Sector Forum

The event also marked the formal launch of the fully constituted SANAC Private Sector Forum across all nine provinces, strengthening SANAC's multisectoral approach to implementing the National Strategic Plan (NSP) for HIV, TB and STIs 2023–2028.

The Forum serves as a platform for business leaders to actively contribute to national health priorities through workplace programmes, investments, innovation, advocacy and strategic partnerships.

Deputy President Mashatile welcomed the growing role of the private sector, noting that government cannot achieve the NSP goals alone. "Government cannot achieve these goals alone. Neither can civil society, labour nor the private sector achieve them independently," he said.

The engagement took place on the eve of South Africa's historic rollout of lenacapavir, a long-acting injectable HIV prevention medicine administered only twice a year.

Describing the introduction of lenacapavir as one of the most significant scientific advances in HIV prevention in recent years, Deputy President Mashatile stressed that its success would depend on effective implementation, sustainable financing and strong partnerships across sectors.

He called on business leaders to support awareness campaigns, workplace education programmes, logistics and supply chain efforts to ensure equitable access to this groundbreaking prevention tool.

The engagement concluded with a renewed commitment from government, business and development partners to work together in accelerating progress towards the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets, ending TB as a public health threat, and strengthening South Africa's overall health security.

Deputy President Mashatile emphasized that the rollout of lenacapavir, the fight against HIV and TB, efforts to combat gender-based violence and the drive to expand opportunities for young people are all part of a broader national mission. "That mission is to build a healthier, more equal, more productive and more resilient South Africa," he said.



Delegates at the meeting with Deputy President and Captains of Industry

Mpumalanga Relaunches Provincial TB Caucus to Strengthen the Fight Against Tuberculosis

- Karabo Makgato

The Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature, led by the Speaker, Honourable Makhosazane Christine Masilela, officially relaunched the Provincial Tuberculosis (TB) Caucus on Tuesday, 12 May 2026, at the Legislature Chambers in Mbombela. The relaunch marked a renewed commitment to strengthening political leadership, accountability, and multi-sectoral collaboration in the fight against tuberculosis in the province.

to empower parliamentarians and stakeholders to advocate for effective TB policies, strengthen oversight, and accelerate progress towards ending TB by 2030.

"MPLs play a critical role in holding government accountable and ensuring that commitments to end TB are translated into action," said the Speaker. "The relaunch of the Caucus demonstrates our determination to strengthen targeted interventions and ensure that

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Honourable Makhosazane Christine Masilela

Coordinated by the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) as the national secretariat, the relaunch was hosted in collaboration with the Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature, the Mpumalanga Provincial Council on AIDS (MPAC), which serves as the provincial secretariat, and the Mpumalanga Department of Health.

The event brought together a broad coalition of stakeholders, including Members of the Provincial Legislature (MPLs), Members of the Executive Council (MECs), the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC), the Mpumalanga Provincial AIDS Council (MPAC), the Civil Society Forum (CSF), the Private Sector Forum (PSF), healthcare workers, and community representatives.

In her opening remarks, Honourable Speaker Masilela highlighted that tuberculosis remains a major public health threat, both globally and nationally. Despite being preventable and curable, TB continues to claim thousands of lives annually and remains one of South Africa's leading causes of death. She noted that the TB Caucus programme is designed

communities receive the support and services they need."

The relaunch in Mpumalanga follows the successful relaunch of the South African TB Caucus in Parliament in 2025, led by the Speaker of the National Assembly, Honourable Thoko Didiza, and the Minister of Health, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi. The South African TB Caucus forms part of the Global TB Caucus, a non-partisan international network



Speaker of the Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature Honourable Makhosazane Christine Masilela outside the Chamber



Delegates at the launch of Mpumalanga Provincial TB Caucus

of parliamentarians advocating for stronger political commitment, increased funding, research and innovation, and improved access to TB services worldwide.

South Africa remains among the world's top 30 high-TB-burden countries, with approximately 56,000 TB-related deaths recorded annually. The burden is compounded by high HIV co-infection rates, with more than half of people diagnosed with TB also living with HIV. The World Health Organization's End TB Strategy identifies political leadership and accountability as critical pillars in the global effort to eliminate TB.

Speaking during the relaunch, Dr Nkhensani Nkhwashu from SANAC emphasised the importance of TB Caucus as platforms through which parliamentarians and legislators can influence policy and strengthen accountability mechanisms across all provinces. "TB Caucus provide a strategic platform where public representatives can champion the fight against TB and mobilise coordinated action across government, civil society, and communities," said Dr Nkhwashu.

The Civil Society Forum Chairperson in Mpumalanga, Ms Sonto Nkosi, welcomed the relaunch and highlighted the importance of addressing poverty, food insecurity, and the social determinants of health as part of the TB response. She stressed that TB treatment adherence is closely linked to adequate nutrition and community support systems.

Mpumalanga Provincial Private Sector Forum, represented by Deputy Chairperson Ms Judith Makhubu, underscored the impact of TB on the province's mining and agricultural sectors. She noted

that mobile and contract workers remain vulnerable to TB infection and emphasised the growing role of private healthcare providers in supporting TB screening, treatment, and awareness programmes.

The Acting Premier and MEC for Health, Ms Sasekani Manzini, addressed attendees on behalf of the provincial government and reaffirmed Mpumalanga's commitment to intensifying the fight against TB. She commended the TB screening activities conducted during the event and acknowledged the critical role played by nurses and frontline healthcare workers in saving lives and restoring hope across communities.

"Many patients still present late for TB and HIV treatment," said Ms Manzini. "The government remains committed to improving healthcare infrastructure, increasing awareness, and strengthening collaboration among all stakeholders to end TB."

A key highlight of the event was the reading and signing of the Barcelona Declaration on TB by Speaker Masilela, the MEC for Health, and representatives of the Civil Society Forum and the Private Sector Forum. The declaration symbolises a global commitment by parliamentarians and stakeholders to increase political leadership, investment, accountability, and advocacy in the fight against TB.

The relaunch concluded with a commitment by the Legislature, in consultation with SANAC, to convene an induction and strategic planning session for the Provincial TB Caucus to strengthen its programme of action going forward.



SANAC Civil Society Forum Provincial Chairperson Ms. Sonto Nkosi speaking at the launch



SANAC Executive Manager Dr Nkhensani Nkhwashu speaking at the launch of Mpumalanga Provincial TB Caucus

EmpowaYouth Week 2026 Dialogue Urges Greater Investment in Young People's Mental Wellbeing and Economic Empowerment

- Simangaliso Motsepe



SANAC CEO Dr. Thembisile Xulu delivering message of support at the Empowa Youth Week

Throughout the dialogue, participants reflected on the social and emotional pressures confronting many young South Africans. High levels of unemployment continue to leave many feeling discouraged and uncertain about their future, while poverty, food insecurity and unstable living conditions place enormous strain on their emotional wellbeing. These circumstances often limit opportunities for education, skills development and economic participation.

The dialogue also highlighted the important role of the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) in coordinating national responses that address the broader social determinants of health. Through partnerships across government, civil society, business and communities, SANAC continues to champion policies and programmes that improve access to health services, promote dignity and strengthen support systems for vulnerable communities.

Addressing the gathering, SANAC CEO, Dr. Thembisile Xulu, said "psychosocial support remains one of the most critical investments in young people's future. Without psychosocial support, young people are more likely to choose survival strategies such as informal work or risky relationships, rather than investment in education or training. Look at the degree to which the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon is so common and normalised."

South Africa's youth cannot meaningfully participate in the economy without deliberate investment in their mental wellbeing, psychosocial support and access to opportunities. This was the resounding message from speakers and participants at the EmpowaYouth Week 2026 Dialogue, held at Koinonia Bible Church in Sebokeng, Sedibeng District on the 20 April 2026.

Hosted under the theme on the first day on the EmpowaYouth "From Survival to Strength: Building Healthy, Purpose-Driven Youth in a Demanding World," the dialogue brought together young people, community leaders, mental health practitioners, faith-based organisations and development partners to confront the realities facing today's youth and explore practical solutions for building resilience and creating sustainable futures.

The EmpowaYouth platform was established to equip, inspire and activate young people to participate meaningfully in the economy. Against a backdrop of rising unemployment, economic inequality, financial hardship and increasing mental health challenges, the initiative seeks to move young people beyond survival by providing practical guidance, mentorship and access to support systems that enable long-term personal and economic growth.

She emphasised that communities have a collective responsibility to create environments where young people feel supported and empowered. "Mentorship, youth centres, churches, sports and arts programmes help build skills, self-esteem and social capital in young



Attendees at Empowa Week



L-R: Ms. Kgomotso Monyai, Radio & TV Producer, Dr. Victor Ramathesele, Medical Doctor & CEO of Medipost Holdings, SANAC CEO Dr. Thembisile Xulu

people. You are not alone. Many are facing a range of setbacks and many of us, young and old, are fighting some type of struggle. It is okay to ask for help."

Mental health specialist Dr. Victor Ramathesele unpacked the science behind stress and its impact on decision-making, explaining that many young people are living in a constant state of survival. And said, "When people are overwhelmed by financial pressure, uncertainty or personal challenges, the body's natural response is to enter survival mode, he explained. Heart rate increases, muscles tense and the brain becomes hyper-alert. While this response is designed to protect us from danger, prolonged exposure to stress makes it difficult to think clearly, regulate emotions and make

informed decisions."

He encouraged young people to understand that anxiety and emotional exhaustion are not signs of personal failure, but natural biological responses to sustained stress. "When we understand what is happening in our bodies, we are better equipped to manage stress, regain clarity and make healthier decisions that support our future."

First day of the dialogue concluded with a strong call for collective action to address the underlying challenges facing young people. Participants agreed that creating lasting change requires more than awareness campaigns. It calls for sustained investment in education, employment opportunities, mental health support, mentorship programmes and safe community spaces that enable young people to thrive and reach their full potential.

As the country continues to confront persistent youth unemployment and widening inequality, EmpowaYouth created an important platform for honest conversations and practical solutions. By bringing together government, civil society, faith-based organisations and development practitioners, the dialogue reinforced the message that building healthy, purpose-driven young people is essential to the country's social and economic future.

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Mentorship, youth centres, churches, sports and arts programmes help build skills, self-esteem and social capital in young people. You are not alone. Many are facing a range of setbacks and many of us, young and old, are fighting some type of struggle. It is okay to ask for help.

SANAC CEO, Dr. Thembisile Xulu

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Youth Voices Lead the Way in Confronting Violence, Health and Opportunity

- Karabo Makgato



GBVF Response Fund Advocacy and Communications Manager Ms. Koketso Rathumbu moderating the Youth Month Dialogue

The South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) joined government, youth leaders and development partners on 25 June 2026 for the Youth at the Centre: Confronting Violence, Health and Opportunity in South Africa dialogue, reaffirming the importance of placing young people at the heart of South Africa's response to HIV, Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (GBVF), mental health challenges and socio-economic inequality.

Convened by the GBVF Response Fund, in partnership with A Seat at the Table, One Young World, SANAC and Tiko, the Youth Month engagement brought together diverse voices to examine the interconnected realities shaping the lives of young people and to identify practical, collaborative solutions.

The dialogue recognised that today's youth continue to face overlapping challenges, including unemployment, HIV vulnerability, gender-based violence, poor mental health, unintended pregnancies and unequal access to education and economic opportunities.

Opening the engagement, GBVF Response Fund CEO Ms Tandvi Nzimande called for integrated action to address the interconnected challenges facing South Africa's youth, including unemployment, HIV, gender-based violence, mental health and teenage pregnancy. "These are not separate problems. They are connected problems, and they need connected solutions," said Ms Nzimande, calling for stronger collaboration across government, civil society, the private sector, development partners and young people themselves.



Young People and Representatives from Government departments at the Youth Month Dialogue

Ms Nzimande emphasised that meaningful progress requires stronger collaboration across sectors, highlighting the GBVF Response Fund's investment of more than R192 million in over 200 community-based organisations, reaching more than 1.2 million beneficiaries with services that promote health, safety and opportunities for young people.

Representing SANAC, Adolescent and Young People (AYP) Technical Lead Ms Nthabiseng Mogowe highlighted the critical role of youth leadership and innovation in strengthening South Africa's HIV response. Her presentation underscored the importance of ensuring that scientific advances reach the young people who need them most, with a focus on emerging HIV prevention options such as Lenacapavir, a long-acting injectable PrEP administered every six months.

Ms Mogowe emphasised that expanding access to



GBVF Response Fund CEO Ms. Tandi Nzimande delivering her opening remarks at the Youth Month Dialogue

innovative, person-centred prevention tools, alongside youth-led and community-driven programmes, is essential to reducing new HIV infections and advancing the country's goal of ending HIV as a public health threat by 2030.

Participants also discussed the continued importance of combination HIV prevention interventions, including access to condoms, HIV testing services, treatment, Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP), Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) services and youth-friendly healthcare.

The dialogue reinforced SANAC's commitment to ensuring that HIV prevention is integrated with broader development priorities, recognising that preventing new HIV infections cannot be separated from addressing violence, poverty, gender inequality and limited access to opportunities.

One of the defining moments of the engagement was the Youth Voices Spotlight, where young people shared personal experiences and reflections on the realities they face daily. Representing students, young women, young men, LGBTQIA+ communities, persons with disabilities and unemployed youth, speakers called for greater inclusion in decision-making and emphasised that policies affecting young people must be informed by their lived experiences.

These perspectives were further explored during a multi-sectoral panel discussion featuring representatives from government departments, SANAC, Tiko and youth development organisations, who examined the links between GBVF, HIV, mental health, education, unemployment and inequality.

Throughout the discussions, participants agreed that meaningful change will only be achieved through coordinated, whole-of-society action that brings together government, civil society, development partners, communities and young people themselves.

The dialogue also served as an important platform to elevate youth priorities ahead of the One Young World Summit, where South Africa is expected to showcase youth-led solutions to national and global challenges.

Among the key objectives of the engagement were strengthening awareness of youth-centred HIV prevention and SRHR interventions, promoting scientific innovations such as Lenacapavir, amplifying youth voices in national policy discussions and strengthening partnerships to deliver integrated responses to GBVF, HIV and socio-economic vulnerability.

Participants concluded the programme by adopting key youth priorities and making practical commitments on how their respective organisations will strengthen collaboration and improve services for young people.



Youth Month Dialogue

SANAC supports launch of Africa's first coalition advocating for the decriminalisation of drugs for personal use

- Karabo Makgato & Simangaliso Motsepe



Ms. Jabu Sibeko SANAC Technical Advisor for Key Population (3rd from Left) with partner representatives and community members at the launch

The South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) participated in the launch of the usubuntu Coalition for the Decriminalisation of Drugs for Personal Use at the Sediba Community Hall in Pretoria on 26 June 2026.

Launched on International Support. Don't Punish Day, the Vusubuntu Coalition is the first national coalition in Africa dedicated to advocating for the decriminalisation of drug possession for personal use. It brings together civil society organisations, people who use drugs, healthcare professionals, legal experts and human rights advocates to promote a public health and human rights-based approach to drug policy.

The coalition envisions a safe, healthy and inclusive South Africa, where responses to drug use are rooted in compassion, evidence, health, human rights, social justice and the African philosophy of Ubuntu. It advocates for policies that prioritise access to healthcare, treatment and psychosocial support over criminal sanctions for people found in possession of drugs for personal use.

Representing SANAC Chief Executive Officer Dr Thembisile Xulu at the launch, SANAC Technical Advisor for Key Populations Ms Jabulile Sibeko reaffirmed SANAC's commitment to evidence-based interventions and harm reduction services, as outlined in the National Strategic Plan (NSP) for HIV, TB and STIs 2023–2028.

"Today, South Africa launches Vusubuntu, the Drug Decriminalisation Coalition and the first national coalition on drug decriminalisation in Africa," said Ms Sibeko.

She explained that decriminalisation is about changing the country's response to substance use from one centred on punishment to one focused on health and wellbeing. "Decriminalisation would mean

shifting substance use from a criminal justice issue to a public health and social matter."

Ms Sibeko further noted that the NSP recognises people who use drugs as a key population and supports evidence-based harm reduction interventions. "The National Strategic Plan for HIV, TB and STIs 2023–2028 advocates for the decriminalisation of drug possession for personal use and prioritises evidence-based harm reduction services."

She added that SANAC supports the expansion of services such as opioid agonist therapy, needle and syringe programmes, psychosocial support and other interventions that reduce harm while protecting the dignity, health and human rights of people who use drugs.

Community members with lived experience who attended the launch welcomed the initiative and expressed hope that it would improve their lives.



Mr. Klaas Mstweni from Sanpud speaking with attendees at the launch of Vusubuntu Coalition in Pretoria (Left)

SANAC Civil Society Forum (CSF) Chair Appeals for Safe Initiation Season and Zero Loss of Life

- Mr Solly Nduku



SANAC Civil Society Chairperson Mr. Solly Nduku

As winter settles across South Africa, many communities begin one of the most important and sacred cultural rites of passage, the initiation season. This period is particularly significant in the Eastern Cape and other parts of the country where customary initiation remains a deeply respected tradition that marks the transition from boyhood to manhood.

On behalf of the SANAC Civil Society Forum, I extend my best wishes to all initiates embarking on this important journey. May they travel safely, learn valuable life lessons, and return home healthy, strong, and empowered.

Customary initiation is an integral part of our cultural heritage and identity. It teaches discipline, responsibility, respect, and community values. However, while we honour and preserve this sacred tradition, we must also reaffirm our collective commitment to protecting the lives, health, and dignity of every initiate.

No family should lose a child during a cultural practice intended to prepare young people for adulthood. Every death, injury, or act of negligence associated with initiation is preventable and undermines the very values that this tradition seeks to uphold.

The 2026 Winter Initiation Season has opened under the theme "Mabaye Bephila, Babuye Bephila," meaning "They must go alive and come back alive." This message must guide the actions of every stakeholder involved in the initiation process.

I therefore urge all initiates, parents, traditional leaders, traditional healers, caregivers, initiation school principals, community members, health practitioners, and government authorities to prioritise safety and ensure strict adherence to all lawful and cultural requirements

throughout the initiation period.

The Customary Initiation Act (Act 2 of 2021) provides a framework to safeguard initiates while preserving cultural traditions. Compliance with the Act is not optional. All initiation schools must be properly registered and monitored, initiates must undergo medical screening before admission, and continuous health oversight must be maintained throughout the season.

I call upon traditional leaders and communities to ensure that only legally recognised initiation schools are allowed to operate. Illegal schools continue to pose a serious threat to the wellbeing of initiates and must be reported to the relevant authorities immediately. Government, traditional leadership structures, law enforcement agencies, healthcare professionals, parents, and communities must work together to achieve a zero-death initiation season.

Key Safety Priorities

- **Parental Responsibility:** Parents and guardians must actively participate in the initiation process by ensuring that their children attend only registered and recognised initiation schools, undergo the necessary medical screening, and understand their rights and responsibilities.
- **Compliance with the Law:** The Customary Initiation Act requires adherence to prescribed standards, including parental consent for initiates between the ages of 16 and 18 years and the prohibition of forced participation.
- **Community Vigilance:** Communities should remain alert and report any illegal initiation schools, abuse, neglect, or unsafe practices to the relevant authorities without delay.
- **Collective Accountability:** The safety and wellbeing of initiates is a shared responsibility. Success will depend on strong collaboration between government departments, traditional leadership structures, civil society organisations, families, and communities.

As we embark on this year's initiation season, let us remember that cultural preservation and the protection of human life must go hand in hand. Together, we can ensure that this sacred rite of passage continues to instil pride, identity, and dignity while safeguarding the lives of those entrusted to our care.

To all initiates, I wish you a safe journey, a meaningful experience, and a successful return to your families and communities. May you go safely and return safely.