

# Increasing Cross-Sectoral Collaboration in Advocacy Efforts for Ear and Hearing Care Services

January 2025

**Phase 1 Map: South Africa**





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## South Africa

In 2024, South Africa has an approximate population of 61 million people.<sup>1</sup> Aligned with global trends, South Africa's population continues to age with the median age forecasted to rise from 28.5 years in 2024 to 32.3 in 2050.<sup>2</sup> As of 2022, South Africa's older adult population, aged 60 years and older, reached over 5 million people, representing 9.2% of the total population.<sup>3</sup> According to projections by the United Nations (UN), South Africa's older adult population aged 65 years and older will reach up to 80 million by 2060, accounting for 14% of the total population.<sup>4</sup>

As the population rises, there are concurrent trends of cognitive decline and hearing loss. These trends perpetuate ageist beliefs that diminishing hearing and cognitive abilities are inevitable aspects of ageing.

Consequently, in South Africa the prevalence of varying degrees of hearing loss is on the rise and affected around 12 million people in 2021.<sup>5</sup> In South Africa, hearing loss is greatly attributable to age-related hearing loss (ARHL). According to a 2019 study, it was found that 74.65% of older adults aged 65 years and older experience some form of hearing loss.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as hearing loss is linked to an increased risk of dementia, it is found to be a modifiable risk factor necessary to prevent cognitive decline in older adults. According to a 2022 study, the prevalence of dementia in older adults aged 65 years and older ranged from 3.8% to 11.0%.<sup>7</sup>

Although the South African National Strategic Plan for Non-Communicable Diseases emphasizes early diagnosis and management of dementia, hearing health is not specifically addressed. While screening for hearing loss in older adults is recommended, there are no specific guidelines for age cohorts or frequency of these tests. Moreover, hearing and ear care initiatives are notably absent in many national policies and civil society efforts, highlighting a gap in comprehensive care for the ageing population.<sup>8</sup>

## National Aged Care Plan

### South African Policy for Older Persons

Created in March 2005 by the Government of Western Cape's Department of Social Development, the South African Policy for Older Persons aims to ensure that quality services for older adults are accessible, affordable, comprehensive, and equitable. The policy envisions creating an enabling environment where older adults, living at home or in care facilities, can age with security and dignity while enjoying active, healthy, and independent lives. To achieve this vision, the policy calls for changes in attitudes and practices at all levels in all sectors, emphasizing the importance of inter-sectoral collaboration. According to the policy, civil society organizations (CSOs) and government departments must work collaboratively to provide comprehensive, person-centred services. Recognizing the central role of family in the South African context, the policy aims to strengthen family and community systems to support older adults in later life. It also emphasizes the need for increased government funding, capacity building, infrastructure development, and training.<sup>9</sup>

This policy builds on the key priorities outlined in the 2002 Madrid Plan of Action from the 2nd World Assembly on Ageing, focusing on three main areas. The priority, Older Persons and Development, aims to enhance societal participation by supporting older adults in their communities and workforce, creating opportunities to prevent early retirement, and ensuring access to education, income security, and emergency support through improved services, social grants, and targeted poverty relief.<sup>9</sup>

The second priority, Advancing Health and Well-Being, promotes lifelong health by emphasizing preventive care and health education to reduce chronic diseases. It seeks to ensure equal access to both primary and specialized health services, including transport and age-friendly facilities. The policy also addresses HIV/AIDS by providing targeted support and caregiving training, trains caregivers and health professionals with a focus on geriatric care and supports mental health and disabilities through affordable treatments and rehabilitation services.<sup>9</sup>

Addressing hearing disabilities is a critical aspect for achieving the second priority. The policy aims to have programs focus on preventing and mitigating activity limitations to enhance quality of life. The policy calls for rehabilitation services which include community and institutional support, early detection, diagnostics, counseling, self-care training, and assistive devices. Specialized services cover complex cases with appropriate facilities and training. A dedicated budget for assistive devices at provincial and district levels is essential to manage demand, maintenance, and replacements. Effective assessment, procurement, and replacement systems must be in place, with trained providers handling device prescriptions. Immediate access to devices should be guaranteed and a provincial database should track all assistive devices.<sup>9</sup>

The third priority, Ensuring Enabling Environments, focuses on improving housing to make it accessible, safe, and supportive, thus promoting emotional and psychological well-being. It supports caregivers by offering specialized training and fair compensation, prevents neglect and abuse through better monitoring of care facilities, and promotes positive images of ageing by challenging stereotypes and encouraging societal support for older adults.<sup>9</sup>

As outlined above, the policy addresses both active and mobile older adults through its development component and supports older, more vulnerable individuals through its health and supportive environments.<sup>9</sup>

## Older Persons Act

The *Older Persons Act* of 2006 follows up on the South African Policy for Older Persons and establishes specific legal requirements and standards for the protection and care of older adults, including mandates for preventing abuse, regulating care facilities, and ensuring oversight of institutions providing services to older persons. It directly addresses legal protections and operational standards. In contrast, the *South African Policy for Older Persons* provides a broader strategic framework aimed at improving the overall quality of life for older individuals. It focuses on policy goals and offers a comprehensive approach to support services, guiding the development of programs and advocacy initiatives.<sup>10</sup>

## **Contribution by the South African Government to the Proposals, Practical Measures, Best Practices and Lessons Learned that will contribute to Promoting and Protecting the Rights and Dignity of Older Persons**

Created in June 2015, the purpose of the Contribution by the South African Government to the Proposals, Practical Measures, Best Practices and Lessons Learned that will contribute to Promoting and Protecting the Rights and Dignity of Older Persons emphasizes several critical rights and protections for older persons. It mandates that UN Member States ensure equal rights and non-discrimination, actively combat marginalization, and support initiatives against age-related discrimination. It also guarantees that older adults receive equal legal protection, have access to legal assistance, and that law enforcement effectively upholds their rights. The policy supports the autonomy of older adults, allowing them to make their own decisions and appoint representatives, with additional support available if they become incapacitated.<sup>11</sup>

It addresses employment and education by eliminating discrimination, ensuring decent working conditions, and providing access to ongoing education and life skills. Health and well-being are prioritized through the extension of free health services and insurance, inclusion of geriatrics in medical training, and specific support for those affected by HIV/AIDS. The policy promotes supportive environments by encouraging home-based care, ensuring quality residential care, providing social protection, and supporting older persons who care for children.<sup>11</sup>

In conflict and disaster situations, the policy requires prioritizing assistance and humane treatment for older adults. It also calls for increased awareness of ageing issues and preparation for old age. Finally, the policy mandates legal protections against abuse and harmful practices, with specific protections for older women and older adults with disabilities. There is no mention of hearing or ear care initiatives within this policy.<sup>11</sup>

## **National Dementia Care Strategies**

### **National Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases**

The South African National Strategic Plan for Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) 2022-2027 aims to address the growing burden of NCDs, including dementia, by promoting prevention, enhancing early diagnosis, and ensuring effective management and care. The plan focuses on raising public awareness to reduce stigma and encourage timely diagnosis, improving access to specialized diagnostic tools and treatment options, and integrating dementia care into primary healthcare services for widespread accessibility. Additionally, it emphasizes providing comprehensive support for caregivers through training programs and respite care and promoting dementia prevention by addressing modifiable risk factors like hypertension and diabetes. The strategy also includes strengthening research and data collection to better understand dementia and develop evidence-based interventions. Through these efforts, the plan seeks to create a sustainable, inclusive healthcare system that effectively manages dementia and improves health outcomes across to reflect a holistic vision of tackling NCDs by promoting healthy lifestyles and improving mental health care services across the country. Hearing and ear care initiatives are not mentioned.<sup>12</sup>

## National Hearing Care Strategies

In South Africa, hearing health is integrated into broader health and disability frameworks rather than being addressed through a standalone national hearing strategy.

### South African National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan 2013-2020

The South African National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan 2013-2020 aims to enhance mental health services across the country by integrating mental health into primary healthcare, improving access to treatment, and reducing stigma associated with mental illnesses. The plan's specific objectives include expanding mental health services within primary healthcare settings, increasing awareness and education about mental health, and providing comprehensive care and support for individuals with mental health conditions. Although the primary focus is on mental health, the framework also addresses sensory disabilities, including hearing impairments, within its broader approach. Specific initiatives related to hearing health include promoting early detection and management of sensory impairments as part of holistic mental health care, ensuring access to hearing aids and rehabilitation services, and integrating hearing health considerations into mental health and disability services. This integrated approach aims to improve overall quality of life for individuals with mental health conditions and sensory disabilities by ensuring they receive comprehensive and accessible care.<sup>13</sup>

### Policy on Disability

Under the Policy on Disability published by the South African government, the focus is on promoting the rights and inclusion of individuals with disabilities, including those with hearing impairments. The policy aims to ensure that people with disabilities receive equitable access to healthcare, including hearing health services. Specific objectives of the policy related to hearing health include improving accessibility to diagnostic and treatment services for hearing impairments, ensuring the availability of assistive devices like hearing aids, and enhancing support for individuals with hearing loss through rehabilitation and community-based programs. The policy also emphasizes the importance of removing barriers—financial, communication, safety, and accessibility barriers—to accessing these services and promoting the full participation of individuals with hearing disabilities in all aspects of society. By addressing hearing health within the broader context of disability rights, the policy seeks to ensure that individuals with hearing impairments receive comprehensive care and support, contributing to their overall well-being and integration into the community.<sup>14</sup>

# Civil Society Organization Engagement

## Age Care-Related CSOs

### Age-in-Action

Founded in 1956, Age-in-Action is a non-government organization (NGO), representing over two million older adults in South Africa. The organization has over 800 NGO members that provide vital services to more than 150,000 older adults. Age-in-Action's mission is to advocate for the rights of older adults. Their programs are designed to ensure that older adults have access to care, support, protection, training and development, and a sustainable income. To achieve these objectives, the organization has initiated community-based healthcare and empowerment programs. In June 2009, Age-in-Action organized demonstrations, exhibitions, and educational seminars as part of World Elder Abuse Awareness Day. Although Age-in-Action advocates for health needs and assistive devices such as wheelchairs, hearing health or ear care services are not mentioned.<sup>15</sup>

### Tafta

Tafta, founded in 1960, is an NGO dedicated to serving older adults. Tafta offers services such as social work, meal delivery, assistive device support, and respite and rehabilitation. They advocate for various legislative issues such as the Older Person's Act of 2006, elder abuse, and funding gaps in aged care. A recent initiative is Tafta's Sawubona Campaign which fights age discrimination by promoting the dignity and rights of older people. The campaign encourages society to truly "see" and value older adults. Although assistive devices such as wheelchairs and walking frames are available, hearing aids or hearing care is not specifically mentioned.<sup>16-18</sup>

### South African Older Persons Forum (SAOPF)

The SAOPF, created in 2000, envisions a society in which the contribution of older adults is acknowledged, older adults can experience security and personal fulfillment, the rights and dignity of older adults is respected, and where older adults are active participants in the development of society. Their mission is to identify and articulate the concerns and needs of the older adult population in South Africa by voicing them and working in collaboration with the Government and other key stakeholders to ensure that these need are being addressed in legislation, services, and programs. A recent report by the SAOPF investigates the gaps and strengths in service provision to mitigate elder abuse in South Africa. Hearing and ear care initiatives are not mentioned.<sup>19</sup>

## Dementia-Related CSOs

### Dementia SA

Founded in 2006, Dementia SA is a leading authority on all forms of dementia in South Africa creating awareness about dementia in South Africa with respect and dignity for those affected and reducing its impact on the individuals, families, and communities. Dementia SA takes an innovative approach to service delivery.

They offer help and support led by trained volunteers where caregivers, nurses, and other individuals can learn to support each other. Dementia SA also runs a 24-hour helpline, 365 days a year. Dementia SA offers home-based caregivers, residential care facility staff, nurses, and community health workers training in specialized person-centered care, which is required when caring for an individual with dementia. Hearing and ear care initiatives are not mentioned.<sup>20</sup>

### **Association for Dementia and Alzheimer's of South Africa**

Founded in 1985, the Association for Dementia and Alzheimer's of South Africa (ADASA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting excellence in dementia care by supporting individuals, families, and care facilities throughout the country. Committed to fostering an inclusive society that respects the dignity and rights of those affected by dementia, ADASA aims to help them thrive within their communities. The organization collaborates with various partners to offer a wide range of services, including psycho-social support, family consultations, support groups, and training. Additionally, ADASA raises awareness through educational resources like blogs and pamphlets. Currently, ADASA is working with the Department of Social Development to advocate for a national development plan with the South African government and underscores the importance of investing in and supporting research to better assist people with dementia and Alzheimer's. Hearing and ear care initiatives are not mentioned.<sup>21</sup>



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