

Chapter 14

Assessing the South African National Health Insurance Readiness

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ABSTRACT

The South African government embarked on the implementation of the National Health Insurance (NHI) system without readiness assessment. Consequently, potential challenges and the influencing factors from information technology (IT) were not empirically known. This study aimed to examine the factors that influence the implementation of the South African NHI, from an IT perspective. Qualitative data were gathered from several sources and the duality of structure from structuration theory was used as a lens for the analysis. The analysis reveals the factors that can influence the implementation of the NHI, from assessment of readiness assessment. The study reveals crucial gaps in the deployment of IT solutions in enabling and supporting the implementation of the NHI. The gaps are essential in assessing the success or failure of the NHI. The factors provide a fresh perspective for developing policies, principles, and standards, to guide the implementation of the NHI in the country which are both technical and non-technical.

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INTRODUCTION

The National Health Insurance is the South African version of the Universal Health Coverage (UHC). Primarily, the NHI system is aimed at bridging the gap between the lower income earners and the middle class by providing equal healthcare services to all citizens (Mhlaba et al., 2016). The newness of the NHI requires the South African environment to be ready for its implementation. This is primarily to avoid failures like many other initiatives, which can be a serious catastrophe for the government and the citizens who look forward to its benefits. Over the years, many systems have failed because of a lack of infrastructure (Adjorlolo & Ellinsen, 2013). Traditional affiliation and the culture of an environment have also been instrumental factors in the success and failure of many systems (Hoque et al., 2014). Additionally, Padarath and Moeti (2023) argued that some parts of South Africa have unique healthcare challenges or opportunities, requiring examining the transformation in improving health service delivery. From these viewpoints, it is important to assess the readiness of a diverse environment like South Africa before critical systems such as the NHI can be implemented, particularly in the rural areas of the country.

As in many sectors, there were expectations in the healthcare sector since the shift in political dispensation in 1994 (O'Laughlin et al., 2013). However, there have been many challenges, which include affordability, making it difficult for many South African citizens to access healthcare services as they would have expected. The challenges continued in terms of equity of health services (Mensah, Mijwil & Abotaleb, 2024). Thus, the Department of Health introduced the NHI system. The primary intention of the NHI system is to ease access to healthcare services for many of the citizens, particularly, the lower income earners. However, the implementation of the NHI system is problematic in that it is influenced by Information Technology (IT) factors, which are both technical and non-technical. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that IT solutions are deployed and accessible unequally across the country. Until this problem is resolved the implementation of the NHI system in the country will continue to be challenged, which requires an ontological enquiry of the current state.

There are distinct factors that can influence the success or failure of implementation of IT solutions, to enable and support programs and services such as healthcare (Masamha et al., 2017). Khanal et al. (2023) explained how technical and non-technical factors must be leveraged in the design and implementation of the NHI including policy formulation. Some of these factors can be noticed in the processes, cultural and sociological areas (Fitzpatrick & Ellingsen, 2013). Moreover, George et al. (2012) state that some of the challenges of IT are security and confidentiality because patients' information is saved online to keep track of their health status.

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