

The Role of the Private Health Sector in Public Health Emergencies: opportunities and challenges

Adamu Addissie MD PhD

The private health sector is meant to play a complementary role to the public health sector, which provides a significant portion of health care provision in most countries including Ethiopia. The private health sector includes both profit and non-profit entities and their roles extend to all the essential elements of the health care system namely, preventive, curative, human resource, pharmaceuticals, and other areas¹. It is not unusual for the private health sector to work hand in hand with the public health sector in various areas, as the private sector is a key constituent in the provision of essential services such as the provision of emergency services. Public private partnership (PPP) is one of the strategic constituents for the Ethiopian ministry of health and has documented successes and best practices^{2,3}.

Furthermore, the role of the private sector was clearly visible in the COVID - 19 response globally and nationally ranging and extending from the production and provision of essential supplies to the provision of critical care services. The role of the private sector in the COVID - 19 response is acclaimed elsewhere and in Ethiopia^{4,5}. The Ethiopian private sector has been of significant support to the COVID - 19 response in various ways, which include the COVID - 19 testing initiatives since the very beginning,⁶ ramping up of testing, subsequent contact tracing and surveillance,

production and distribution of hygiene related products, production and distribution of personal protection equipment (PPE), such as face-masks, and in the provision of emergency intensive medical care for those with severe and critical illnesses. Private emergency rooms and private ambulance services have also been used for transporting the critically ill. To this effect, private clinics and hospitals have been providing Intensive Care Unit (ICU) services for patients who required those services and accordingly many have benefitted from it especially at a time when all the ICU beds in the designated COVID - 19 treatment centers and hospitals were fully occupied.

The national Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (REF) reports from November 2020 iterated that PPP have been demonstrated in earlier public health crises such as the Ebola pandemic and this continued during the COVID - 19 pandemic⁷. The various roles of the sector were shown to evolve with the evolving needs of the different types and stages of the pandemics. The continued role of the private sector is to be appreciated, which however was not without challenges and concerns⁸. The challenges of involving the private sector in the emergency COVID - 19 response include financial, ethical, and moral duty.

Furthermore, the ethical dilemmas of involving the private sector include a disaster and crisis which would affect the marginal financial benefits of the private sector, such as whether to charge and/or how much to charge for ICU services when patients are unable to afford the services and no alternate arrangements can be made. Universally emergency care is a moral responsibility for all in the healthcare professions. The question is how to cater for the resources especially for the profit-making sector. It is to be noted that services such as ICU require expensive investments. Various anecdotal resentments and complaints were reflected in relation to the costs of the provision of such treatments by the private sector.

The dilemma rests on how to balance between moral-duty and profit especially during emergencies. It is legitimate to solicit for fair returns for the care that has been provided. Such commodification of medical care

¹ Baxter, D. and Casady, CB. Proactive and Strategic Healthcare Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in the Coronavirus (Covid-19) Epoch; Sustainability 2020, 12, 5097; doi:10.3390/su12125097

² MoH, HEPCAPS2 Project. 2015. Strengthening Public Private Partnerships for More and Better Health Outcomes in Ethiopia: Expert Reviews and Case Studies. Ethiopian Ministry of Health, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc.: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Boston, Massachusetts.

³ MoH, GFF and WBG, Ethiopia Health Private Sector Assessment 2019.

⁴ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. Public Private Partnership Responses to COVID-19 and Future Pandemics: Proceedings of a Workshop in Brief. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25999>.

⁵ Shilson-Thomas A, and Mills W, All hands-on deck Public-private partnerships during COVID-19, Reform Resilient State, November 2020,

⁶ Desta K, Wolde M, Tadesse G, Tsegaye A. Biochemical and immuno-hematological test availability during the COVID-19 pandemic: The case of private diagnostic laboratories in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia [Ethiop. J. Health Dev. 2021; 35(1):3-8]

⁷ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. Public Private Partnership Responses to COVID-19 and Future Pandemics: Proceedings of a Workshop in Brief. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25999>.

⁸ CIPE (Center for International Private Enterprise), Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ethiopia: The Private Sector Experience, May 2020

however seems to have no regulatory mechanisms and in most cases no leeway for those who cannot afford to pay. The public sector has an across-the-board fee policy including exemption requirements. However, this seems to be absent in the private-for-profit sector.

While the private health sector has a significant stake in the response towards public health emergencies, this can at times result in moral and implementational challenges which needs to be addressed by developing engagement guidelines based on a win-win approach. There is an urgent need for clear guidelines and mutual understanding. Furthermore, the private-for-profit health sector needs to be guided and supported to cherish not only the financial but also the moral dividends. At the very end what matters most is the value of saving lives at any cost.