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NIP: The Unsung Backbone of Namibia's Healthcare System



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NIP: The Unsung Backbone of Namibia's Healthcare System

By Aloni Steven, The Commerce and Industry Review Magazine

In the shadows of Namibia's bustling hospitals and remote clinics, an unseen force works tirelessly to safeguard the nation's health. The Namibia Institute of Pathology Limited (NIP) operates not with fanfare, but with precision, processing thousands of tests, detecting life threatening diseases, and arming doctors with the critical data that saves lives daily. Yet, for most Namibians, its name remains unknown, its impact understated.

In this exclusive feature, we lift the lid on NIP, the unsung backbone of Namibia's healthcare system. Through a candid conversation with Chief Executive Officer, Kapena Tjombonde, we uncover the institution's quiet but far reaching revolution: from battling pandemics and bridging the rural-urban healthcare divide to pioneering cutting-edge research and envisaged local medical manufacturing.

This is the story of an organisation that doesn't just support Namibia's health sector; it sustains it. A story of resilience, innovation, and an unyielding commitment to ensuring that no Namibian, whether in Windhoek or the remotest village, is left without a fighting chance for good health.

Welcome to the untold journey of NIP, where science meets service, and every test result carries the weight of a nation's well-being.

In this exclusive feature, *Commerce and Industry Review Magazine* takes you inside an honest one-on-one conversation with Kapena Tjombonde, the Chief Executive Officer of the Namibia Institute of Pathology Limited (NIP), a commercial Public Enterprise.

Often operating behind the scenes, NIP is rarely in the public spotlight, yet its impact on the nation's healthcare system is nothing short of foundational.

This article unveils the often-unseen dedication, challenges, and strategic decisions that fuel Namibia's health sector. From navigating pandemics and scaling nationwide operations to training local specialists and pioneering medical research, NIP's story is one of commitment, innovation, and national service.

It is no overstatement to say that the Namibia Institute of Pathology Limited stands



Kapena Tjombonde, the Chief Executive Officer of the Namibia Institute of Pathology Limited (NIP)



NIP Launches First Local Medical Supply Production Facility in Swakopmund. The Namibia Industrialisation Platform (NIP) has launched the country's first local medical supply production facility in Swakopmund. The facility will not only serve Namibia's healthcare needs but will also target the broader SADC market. This milestone positions NIP as the first State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) in Namibia to break ground in local medical supply manufacturing, significantly shortening the supply chain and improving efficiency in healthcare service delivery across the country.

as the pillar upon which much of Namibia's healthcare system rests. The diagnostics, data, and insights generated within its laboratories inform the majority of medical decisions made in the country; quietly saving lives every day.

Join us for an in-depth look at the organisation's far-reaching impact, strategic vision, and transformative role in Namibia's healthcare system.

NIP's Origins and Mandate

Established by an Act of Parliament (Act 15 of 1999), NIP was created to modernise the country's diagnostic landscape. By transforming and consolidating laboratories from the Ministry of Health and Social Services, NIP emerged as a semi-autonomous public enterprise tasked with delivering diagnostic services to both public and private sectors, on a commercial basis.

Its mandate extends beyond diagnostics. NIP is charged with building laboratory capacity across all 14 regions of the country, conducting medical research, and training Namibian professionals in laboratory sciences. In a country where equitable access to healthcare is both a constitutional right and a logistical challenge, NIP's national footprint of 37 laboratories, serving over 30 hospitals, 41 health centres, and 280 clinics, is essential.

Vision and Strategic Transformation

"I am privileged to lead an organisation that forms the backbone of our country's healthcare," says Tjombonde, whose leadership marks a pivotal chapter in NIP's evolution. Under her stewardship, NIP is guided by the Integrated Strategic Business Plan (ISBP) 2022–2027, a bold blueprint for transformation.

At the heart of this strategy is a commitment to innovation, customer-centric services, digital transformation, and equity.

"Every Namibian, regardless of location, deserves access to accurate and timely diagnostics," she affirms. Medical diagnostics inform nearly 70% of all clinical decisions, underscoring their vital role in effective healthcare delivery.

"Without timely and accurate lab results, doctors are left to treat symptoms in the dark," Tjombonde says. With laboratories strategically positioned across every region, NIP bridges the healthcare gap between urban hospitals and rural clinics, ensuring diagnostic equity nationwide.

Milestones, Modernisation, Expansion & Closing the Rural-Urban Divide

Under the current leadership, NIP has achieved several transformative milestones:

- Enhanced turnaround times via its Equipment Replacement Plan project, replacing over 80% instruments that aged over time, and supply chain logistics.
- Nationwide implementation of a reliable specimen transport network.
- Transition to ISO 15189:2022 for strengthened quality assurance.
- Workforce development and leadership programmes to upskill local talent.
- Improved financial sustainability through more effective revenue collection.

Despite notable progress, geographic disparities in healthcare access remain a critical challenge. Namibia's vast terrain and underdeveloped infrastructure disproportionately affect rural populations. "We cannot allow geography to dictate who gets lifesaving diagnostics," Tjombonde says. Expanding outreach to underserved areas is a top priority.

Research and Resilience: Lessons from the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the vulnerabilities of Namibia's healthcare diagnostics ecosystem. In the early days, the country had to ship samples abroad, to South Africa or Senegal, for testing.

"We couldn't advise our government on how the virus was behaving locally," Tjombonde admits. "We had to wait and watch how other countries responded."



This experience galvanised NIP’s drive to build its research capacity. Today, it’s not just a vision; it’s happening. The soon-to-be-launched Molecular Medicine Centre of Excellence will empower NIP to study local disease patterns, conduct variant tracking, and advise on future pandemic responses. This means real-time, in-country decisions; no more waiting.

Already, the organisation has decentralised molecular testing to seven regional centres, enabling tests for HIV, DNA, PCR, HIV viral load and tuberculosis, within the regions. Staff have been cross-trained, and administrative personnel with scientific backgrounds were redeployed during the crisis to keep operations going.

“We learned that local capacity is not a luxury, it’s a necessity,” reflects Tjombonde. The experience underscored the urgency of decentralising services and investing in domestic manufacturing of essential medical supplies.

Diagnostics for a Complex Nation

NIP performs over **1,100 different types of diagnostic tests** across all major medical disciplines, including:

Molecular Diagnostics, Clinical Chemistry, Microbiology, Mycobacteriology, Histopathology, Haematology and Serology

High-demand services such as full blood counts, liver and kidney function tests, and infectious disease screening for HIV and TB are foundational to frontline care.

Digital Leap: Technology Driving Efficiency & Building Resilience Through Local Manufacturing

Digital transformation is a cornerstone of NIP’s strategic vision. The implementation of the MEDITECH Expanse Laboratory Information System

(LIS), along with tablet-based result delivery and automated lab instruments, has streamlined operations and reduced human error. Real-time dashboards now enhance decision-making and resource management.

In a groundbreaking initiative, NIP launched its first local medical supply production facility in Swakopmund. The plant will produce specimen collection tubes, reducing reliance on imports and positioning Namibia as a regional supplier within the SADC block. Plans are envisaged to manufacture gloves and other essentials, with policies in place to support domestic industry growth.

“Manufacturing these supplies locally not only protects us from global shortages but creates jobs and economic resilience,” Tjombonde says. Such initiatives would not only generate employment and address supply chain disruptions as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, but would also significantly bolster Namibia’s foreign reserves, not to mention provide much-needed relief from the often-teething challenges of the public procurement process.

Challenges and Bold Solutions

Persistent challenges remain. Currency volatility, procurement delays, and a shortage of specialised professionals and pathologists continue to constrain operations. In response, NIP has forged partnerships with academic institutions like UNAM to train local pathologists and is actively advocating for procurement reforms that better serve the health sector.

There is an urgent need to reform the Public Procurement Act to better accommodate the unique demands of different sectors and scenarios. A glaring example of the current system undermining its own objectives can be seen in recent drought relief efforts and school hostel food procurement. In both cases, the delivery of critical emergency supplies was delayed due to legal disputes over tender awards, initiated by

parties claiming entitlement to the contracts.

Regional Reach: Positioning Namibia as a Diagnostic Hub

With neighbouring countries outsourcing diagnostics, NIP sees an opportunity. “Angolans are already seeking healthcare in our hospitals, why not extend our lab services?” asks Tjombonde. Plans are underway to develop six Centres of Excellence, beginning with molecular medicine, including advanced genomic sequencing for diseases such as influenza and COVID-19.

Public-Private Synergy, A Shared Responsibility

Operating on a commercial model, NIP aligns its pricing with Namibian Association of Medical Aid Funds (NAMAF) benchmark tariffs, but it is public sector service delivery that accounts for over 90% of its revenue. Still, the CEO emphasises the need for stronger private sector involvement, particularly from Namibia’s mining sector, growing oil, gas, and green hydrogen industries.

“Companies benefitting from Namibia’s resources must also invest in the health of its people,” she asserts. Future fundraising initiatives, including high-profile galas, aim to cultivate corporate support for medical research and innovation.

A Future-Focused Agenda and Final Reflections: A National Asset Worth Celebrating

Over the next three years, NIP aims to modernise 100% of its testing platforms, expand access to 80% of peripheral regions and rebrand the institution to reflect its modern capabilities and national significance.

“We are more than a testing agency; we are a catalyst for health policy, clinical care, and national resilience,” Tjombonde concludes. With continued investment in infrastructure, innovation, and human capital, NIP is charting a path not just for a stronger institution, but for a healthier Namibia.

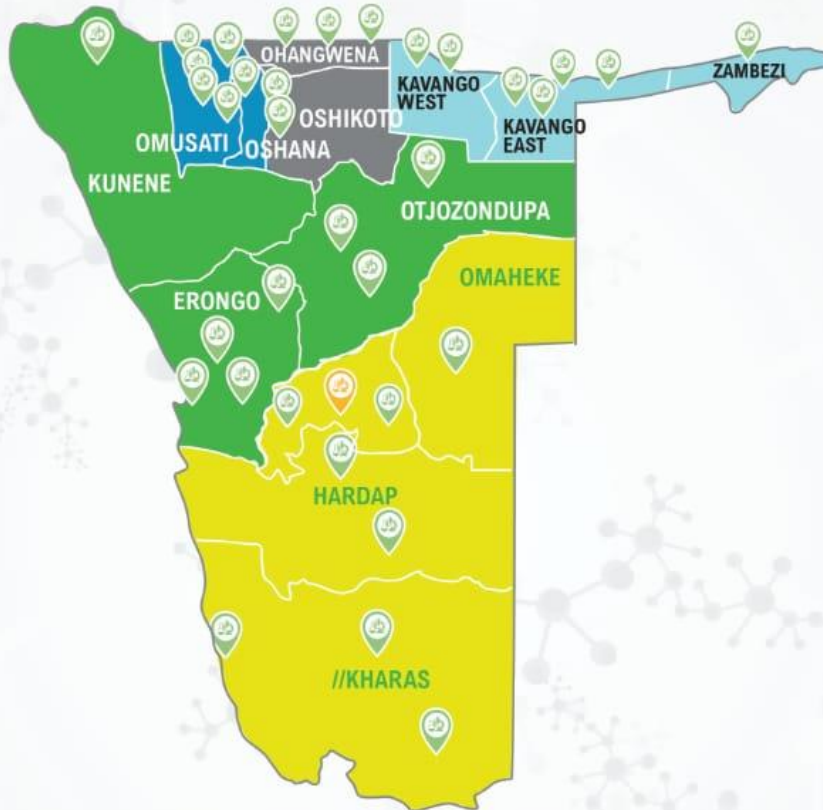
As Namibia’s healthcare landscape evolves, the Namibia Institute of Pathology Limited stands tall as a quiet giant, transforming diagnostics, training the next generation of scientists, and anchoring public health with integrity and innovation.



Namibia Institute of Pathology Limited

LABORATORIES

OUR NATIONAL FOOTPRINT



Windhoek & South

- 1) Katutura
- 2) NIP Windhoek
- 3) Gobabis
- 4) Rehoboth
- 5) Mariental
- 6) Keetmanshoop
- 7) Luderitz
- 8) Karasburg

WHK Central Ref Lab

- a) Core lab
- b) Anatomical Pathology
- c) Microbiology
- d) Mycobacteriology (TB)
- e) Lab Support Services
- f) Molecular Diagnosis

Central

- 1) Otjiwarongo
- 2) Okakarara
- 3) Omaruru
- 4) Usakos
- 5) Swakopmund
- 6) Walvis Bay
- 7) Outjo
- 8) Khorixas

North East

- 1) Rundu Regional Reference Laboratory (RRL)
- 2) Katima Mulilo
- 3) Andara
- 4) Nyangana
- 5) Nankudu
- 6) Grootfontein

North Central

- 1) Ondangwa Private
- 2) Onandjokwe
- 3) Engela
- 4) Eenhana
- 5) Okongo
- 6) Omuthiya
- 7) Tsumeb

North West

- 1) Oshakati RRL
- 2) Ongwediva Private
- 3) Okahao
- 4) Oshikuku
- 5) Tsandi
- 6) Outapi
- 7) Opuwo

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