

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN FOCUS AT THE SCIENCE FORUM OF SOUTH AFRICA

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Community engagement in the health sector came under the spotlight at the [Science Forum of South Africa 2023](#) on 07 December 2023. A discussion was convened under the title, “Are community voices being heard and is community engagement adequate in health?”

The session was facilitated by a diverse panel comprising of Ms Neetha Morar, Senior Research Manager at [HIV and other Infectious Diseases Research Unit \(HIDRU\)](#), Dr André Rose, Deputy-Director at



[South African Population Research Infrastructure Network \(SAPRIN\)](#), Mr Hlakudi Malatjie, Founder of Malusi Youth Development Organisation (Community Advisory Board member) and Ms Dudu Maziya, Head of Communication from the [Grow Great](#) NGO.

The symposium was convened from 06 – 08 December in Pretoria under the theme, “Igniting Conversations About Science – People, Partnerships, Priorities for the Decadal Plan.” The Forum was co-hosted by the [Department of Science and Innovation \(DSI\)](#) and the [Science Diplomacy Capital for Africa \(SDCfA\)](#) initiative.

Approximately 20 stakeholders were in attendance at the community engagement symposium discussion and they were representative of various sectors including youth development, academia, ecology, global health and post graduate students.

The session explored the extent to which the voices of the community are heard and acted upon in research and health programmes in South Africa. It focused on understanding participant perceptions and responses to community engagement.

SAPRIN has approximately 435 000 people across four Health and Demographic Surveillance System (HDSS) nodes which they wish to expand. “SAPRIN has been able to retain participants in its

longitudinal surveillance programme for over two decades, in some nodes. Community engagement and support has been pivotal to this success,” said Dr Rose.

Some participants said that community partnerships between local health care providers and the users of the services needed to be strengthened. Participants felt that the “top down” approach is still practiced in research and health programmes.

Concerns about limited consultation, accountability, and feedback to the community when research is conducted or when interventions are set up were also raised. An example was made of a community in India that destroyed solar panels because they did not understand its value in providing energy.

“Engaging communities in research from the onset through citizen science is not only a way to gather data, but also a means to build trust, co-create knowledge and effectively communicate scientific findings,” said Ms Maziya. She stressed that this is essential for meaningful impact and sustaining interest and involvement in research efforts.

Research translation using innovative methods including art and training of community members was described as key to enhance the understanding of complex scientific terms. It was also raised that researchers and health care providers require training on community engagement practices and strategies.

Mrs Morar said that as citizens, we all have a public responsibility to not only engage the community in research and health programmes but also involve our stakeholders as partners or collaborators in the development of interventions and in the research concepts. This may contribute to the uptake and sustainability of treatment and prevention interventions explained Mrs Morar.