



## In Conversation with Dr Nzimande – Mbele

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In this edition of *The SAPRIN Connection*, we speak to Dr Nompumelelo Nzimande - Mbele, Nodal Director of USINGA.

Dr Nzimande heads the youngest of the six SAPRIN HDSS nodes, Umlazi Surveillance Initiative to Nurture Grassroots Action ([USINGA](#)). Responsible for setting up the node in wards 79 and 82 in Umlazi, Dr Nzimande – Mbele finds herself navigating the complex landscape and is now seeing her efforts bear fruit.

She is a lecturer and demographer at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in the discipline of Population Studies at the School of Built Environment and Development Studies (SoBEDS). Here she teaches elementary and advanced Demographic Methods to Honours and Masters students.



Dr Nzimande – Mbele has numerous qualifications to her name, with her latest being a PhD in Population Studies from UKZN. She also holds an MA in Sociology/Demography from the University of Wisconsin – Madison and a MA in Sociology, Honours in Sociology and a Bachelor of Social Science from UKZN.

Dr Nzimande – Mbele recalls how in the late nineties while deciding to pursue her masters in sociology she found herself at a crossroad. The further she delved into sociology, the more she felt enticed by quantitative research approaches through work she conducted with Professor Charles Crothers. Around this time the fields of demography and population studies were beginning to open up in South Africa.

Professor Julian May was involved in setting up the Population Studies unit at UKZN and Dr Nzimande – Mbele found this space a better fit for her. She went on to register her Masters in Sociology with Professor Crothers, but did all of her coursework and dissertation in population studies. Concurrently, the African Population Conference took place in Durban around 1999 and she attended. She vividly recollects that her exposure here cemented her pathway into population studies.

Speaking about setting up USINGA, Dr Nzimande – Mbele notes that community engagement has been a highlight in the formative phases of establishing the node. This has also come with its challenges as the list of role players expanded as the process unfolded. It has been a steep learning curve but now the relationships have been developed, to assist with the smooth functioning of USINGA. She describes the community engagement at the various levels in USINGA as encouraging.

Dr Nzimande – Mbele says that USINGA is important due to its location within the Population Studies unit at the school of Built Environment and Development Studies. She explains that for population studies to have a HDSS node is an achievement as they are usually found within Health departments.



Secondly it is important for the students. “It is exciting as having our own HDSS node means that we will soon have our own data. We are planning to roll out student engagements as we take our roadshow to our university and partner institutions. We will be presenting our data and hope to generate academic interest from students who are keen to use our data. We have started engaging Masters and Honours students within our cluster and encourage them to run their research studies using USINGA,” elaborated Dr Nzimande – Mbele.

USINGA is also important as it has the potential to change people’s lives. The effect it is having on people is already being seen, through the community workers. Dr Nzimande – Mbele enthuses, “As progress is being made in setting up the node, involving the community and collecting our data, the community contribution and shift is amazing. Yes, there is a perception that change will not be immediate but now there is the understanding that at least our issues will be documented, as a start. We are working together, better now. There is hope. We are more intentional with our collaboration and coordination.”

Setting up the node has not been without its challenges. Coordination amongst multiple research institutions, specifically on the roles and use of resources required attention. Physical space for USINGA staff has been a critical challenge. Dr Nzimande – Mbele has had to manoeuvre through this obstacle across the institutions to find solutions.

Dr Nzimande – Mbele cites crime as her biggest concern. This is an urban node and it is a harsh environment. However, the coordination of community leadership at the various levels has been astounding. Dr Nzimande – Mbele has made significant strides in stakeholder engagement. The Community Advisory Board is a bridge between the community and USINGA.

The USINGA Community Policing Forum (CPF) has come onboard and there are currently 45 members that accompany fieldworkers into the wards. Recently a USINGA vehicle was hijacked and a CPF member could not be located. The community mobilised and searched for the vehicle and missing person. Both the vehicle and person were found. Relationships are being fostered with the communities and the results are looking positive.

When asked about her achievements Dr Nzimande – Mbele reflected on her work on bridging the gap between academia and governance – something she describes as a very hard space. Her partnerships and collaborations with departments such as the Department of Social Development, Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Statistics South Africa, and United Nations Population Fund have been on how to ensure population indicators are included in government policies and programmes at the various levels.

She notes for instance that previously, interaction was with national and provincial governments. However, the past few years have seen municipalities come into the picture.

Her contributions to her discipline are also evident from the numerous bodies she sits on, such as the Scientific Committee for the African Union of the Study of Population (UAPS) and African Population Conference 2024. Between 2014 and 2017 she served as the President of the Population Association of Southern Africa. She was appointed in 2020 by the Statistician-General of South Africa, Mr Risenga Maluleke as the Chair of the Census 2022 National Advisory Committee (NAC). Since 2007 she is the Director of the Applied Population Studies Training and Research Programme (APSTAR). She represents UKZN in Partners in Population and Development and chaired the population and social statistics sub-committee at the Statistics South Africa Council. She is the Chair of the Stats Council since April 2024.