



Health and Ageing Research in the Limelight

April 2024

Health and Ageing in Africa: Longitudinal Studies in South Africa ([HAALSA](#)) was in focus at Wits University from 5 – 12 February. Building on ten years of HAALSA work at the MRC/Wits Agincourt Unit in Mpumalanga, a new phase of the work was launched.

HAALSA is funded by the National Institute of Ageing in the United States of America, with the main leaders being Harvard and Wits University. The new phase started in June 2023 and is funded for five years. It will see the South African Population Research Infrastructure Network ([SAPRIN](#)) and University of Cape Town's (UCT)



Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit ([SALDRU](#)) also take on leadership roles in expanding the study to a national level.

As a national research infrastructure, SAPRIN is an ideal platform for piloting the national HAALSA survey on healthy ageing and cognitive wellbeing. HAALSA is important because the South African population is ageing, with a larger proportion over the age of 50 than ever before. A balance is required at a policy level to prepare for the needs of older people and help them achieve healthy and fulfilling lives.

Speaking to [The Conversation](#) Wits University Professors Stephen Tollman and Kathleen Kahn involved in Agincourt explained that, “Ageing is not only about old people; it starts at birth, even earlier, because experiences at key periods influence a person’s life.”

During her closing remarks, Professor Liesl Zühlke, South African Medical Research Council ([SAMRC](#)) Vice President Extramural Research & Internal Portfolio said that, “Linking research and policy to advance South Africa's agenda on ageing is so clearly needed and of course would involve a concerted effort from all stakeholders to integrate evidence-based research findings into the development and implementation of policies aimed at addressing the needs and challenges of the ageing population.”

The extensive programme included a public launch of *Health, Ageing and Dementias in Southern Africa: Addressing Inequities over the Life Course*, workshops, discussions, site visits and training. The programme was attended by scientists, various government departments, research bodies, universities and community leaders.

A HAALSA: SAPRIN workshop formed part of the proceedings and was attended by node leaders and scientists from SAPRIN nodes. The workshop engaged with the HAALSA lead scientists and was aimed at preparing for SAPRIN's role.

The SAPRIN portion will be embedded as part of a national household survey. Assessments of older adult health and wellbeing including cognitive health will also take place. These assessments are relevant because vulnerable households look after older people and are also dependent on them for childcare and financial assistance.

The pilot study will take place in 10 clusters across 5 SAPRIN nodes, namely, [Agincourt](#) (rural), Africa Health Research Institute ([AHRI](#)) (rural), ([DIMAMO](#)) (peri-urban), [GRT-INSPIRED](#) (urban) and Cape Town Systematic Healthcare Action Research Project ([C-SHARP](#)) (urban).

Agincourt was the anchor of the first ten years of work in this field and they host a cohort of older adults that are followed up over time to study health outcomes and socio-economic conditions. The fourth wave of follow-up of the Agincourt cohort commenced after the public launch. Several scientists visited Agincourt in Mpumalanga to conduct training and interact with stakeholders and members of the scientific advisory committee to gain a greater understanding of the node.

Professor Mark Collinson, the Co-director of SAPRIN said that, “to recognise the value and contribution of older adults to our society we need to understand the health risks that occur with getting older and improve our ability to mitigate risks, treat health problems and care for people with mild or severe forms of cognitive ill-health. HAALSA is a multi-level study, building on the work at Agincourt to strengthen the national relevance and impact of this research.”