



UThingo Hosts Community Engagement Workshop

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CAB members and the research team

On 13 June 2026, the UThingo team from the Health Systems Research Unit (HSRU) hosted its first dissemination community engagement workshop, bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders from across Durban. The session formed part of ongoing work to co-develop a wellbeing scale for adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

Building on earlier work conducted among adolescents and young people in the region by Dr Darshini Govindasamy, UThingo senior Principal Investigator, the UThingo study aims to co-develop a wellbeing tool that reflects the lived experiences and needs of adolescents, particularly those living with HIV in South Africa. This work is important in helping ensure that programmes and policies for young people are practical, relevant, and responsive to the realities they face in their everyday lives.

The workshop brought together a diverse group of community stakeholders from the Durban area. Participants included representatives from KwaZulu-Natal civil society sectors (men's, youth, LGBTQIA+ and women's sectors), the Department of Social Development, the South African Police Service Community Policing Forum (CPF), and community health workers. The engagement aimed to gather



feedback on the preliminary findings from ten completed focus group discussions, conducted with adolescent–caregiver dyads in two parallel groups.

The focus group discussions were semi structured, informed by preliminary synthesis work by Carries et al (2026), which laid the foundation for exploring the wellbeing of adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa. The discussions were rich and constructive, with stakeholders offering valuable insights to strengthen the research approach.

Community Advisory Board (CAB) members emphasised the importance of involving spiritual leaders alongside social workers and psychologists when working with vulnerable populations such as people living with HIV, recognising their role as key sources of comfort and psychological support within communities.

CAB members also emphasised the need to leverage existing community structures, such as support groups and community centres, when engaging young people. These platforms were recognised as accessible, trusted, and already embedded within communities. CPF members reaffirmed their commitment to child protection and safety, noting opportunities for improved collaboration and streamlined referral pathways.

Feedback on preliminary findings pointed to significant challenges linked to disrupted family structures and the pressures faced by single-parent households. One of the CAB members expressed that, “They (men) feel like giving a child love is providing shelter, providing food, providing education...Then I realised that their fathers were never present so nobody mentored them on how to raise a kid, they are only fighting that their kids must not grow up in poverty like how they grew up.” In response, CAB members encouraged stronger collaboration between researchers and community leaders, stressing the importance of conducting research within communities rather than limiting engagement to formal settings.

The workshop concluded with strong appreciation from the CAB for the inclusive approach adopted by the research team, alongside a clear call for continued collaboration and more integrated ways of working. Members also emphasised the need for parenting support initiatives, particularly for young and first-time parents, highlighting that social support should extend beyond financial assistance, to include guidance and education.

Reflecting a Human-Centred Design (HCD) approach, which centres the experiences and inputs of communities in shaping research processes, the engagement underscored the value of co-creation and iterative learning. Ms Khayelihle Ngcobo, one of the research assistants remarked that, “It was a brilliant session. It was lovely to see that the work we have been doing is seen as valid and important by the CAB members. It was also encouraging to see that the CAB members support the work we do and think it is necessary for empowering these vulnerable communities.”

Building on this momentum, the next phases of the study will remain cognisant of community perspectives and the important role that communities play in the overall wellbeing of adolescents in this context.