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Africa's Brain Health Future Advocated for at the G20

Professor Stephen Tollman and colleagues launch a roadmap for Africa's brain health at a G20 ministerial side meeting.

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At the recent G20 Ministerial side meeting on Brain Health, Professor Stephen Tollman, Director of the SAMRC/Wits Rural Health Transitions Unit (Agincourt), joined African and international leaders as part of the Davos Alzheimer's Collaborative (DAC) Africa Task Force to launch the continent's first Five-Year Brain Health Action Plan.

Strengthening brain health is not a standalone goal but part of a wider movement to ensure that the continent's demographic dividend translates into sustained innovation and wellbeing.

The roadmap reframes brain health as a social and economic investment rather than a purely medical concern, recognising that cognitive health underpins productivity, creativity, and innovation.

Professor Stephen Tollman
Director of the SAMRC/Wits Rural Health Transitions Unit (Agincourt)

It highlights six strategic areas for action: advocacy, brain economy, data/digital/AI, resource repurposing, breaking down silos, and sustainable funding.

With a median age of 19 and the world's fastest-growing working-age population, Africa holds extraordinary potential. It also faces the rising burden of brain-related conditions such as dementia, which are projected to triple by 2050.

For Agincourt, which has built one of Africa's most comprehensive longitudinal health and demographic surveillance systems for over 30 years, the plan's emphasis on data and digital infrastructure is both timely and deeply resonant. The unit's research already captures the interplay of brain health, chronic disease, mental health, and social determinants across the life course (from early adulthood through to older age).

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491 Peter Mokaba Road, Overport, Durban
E-mail: saprin@mrc.ac.za
Website: https://saprin.mrc.ac.za/

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This evidence base offers a critical foundation for understanding how education, work, poverty, and care transitions shape cognitive ageing in African settings.

"The data and systems are already in place," said Professor Tollman. "Brain health runs through every stage of life and every sector of society. If we integrate it into what Africa is already doing well, we can protect our ageing citizens and sustain our economies."

Agincourt's existing datasets provide the kind of longitudinal, real-world data that the Brain Health Plan seeks to mobilise. They enable the modelling of cognitive decline, functional loss, and comorbidities in relation to education, cardiovascular health, HIV, and broader social conditions. These insights are essential for designing equitable, cost-effective interventions grounded in African realities.

By linking its data-driven approach to the DAC's global call for investment in brain capital, Agincourt exemplifies how Africa's research infrastructure can inform global priorities.

In the words of DAC Chair, George Vradenburg, "Investing in healthy minds is investing in long-term growth." Agincourt's contribution makes that investment measurable through a clear understanding of how healthy brains sustain healthy societies.

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