



USINGA: Harnessing Data to Drive Community Health and Policy

By Sindisiwe Ngobese and Olwethu Mlangeni

December 2025

In September 2025, USINGA shared its scientific work at the Population Association of Southern Africa (PASA) Conference in Pretoria. Multiple papers were presented using data collected by the USINGA HDSS node and from projects embedded within, such as ARISE and ARISE-DASH, showcasing how surveillance data can drive community-centred research and action, further strengthening its role in health research and development of interventions.

The Umlazi Surveillance Initiative to Nurture Grassroot Action (USINGA-HDSS) continues to lead in collecting vital community data and translating

these insights into actionable interventions that address health and development needs in Umlazi. USINGA informs policymakers and service providers through strategic partnerships and rigorous research, ensuring evidence-based decisions that meet community needs.

The conference provided a platform for USINGA to present key research findings and ongoing projects, highlighting the practical applications of surveillance data in improving community health. One of the presentations made by Palesa Mataboge, the Project Manager of USINGA titled, *“Building Evidence-Based Interventions with HDSS Data”*, focused on how HDSS data is being used to develop evidence-based interventions across three areas: service delivery, adolescent health, and climate and health. A key example discussed was the establishment of a mobile clinic in Umlazi Section D. This clinic was developed through partnerships with the municipality, via *Operation Sukumasakhe*, to address immunization gaps observed during data collection.

The presentation further highlighted the ARISE-DASH research network, an intervention project under USINGA that co-designs adolescent health interventions in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, nutrition, physical activity, and mental health. In South Africa, the focus has been on adolescent nutrition and physical activity, supported by a TikTok campaign promoting healthy eating and active lifestyles.



[Dr Nompumelelo Mbele, Nodal Director of USINGA](#)



Pushing deeper into adolescent well-being, Tankiso Mahlase's presentation titled, *“Food Security in Umlazi: The Association between Household Structure and Adolescent Nutrition,”* explored how household composition affects adolescent nutrition, using data from the ARISE cohorts. It highlighted the influence of guardian roles and socioeconomic status on dietary habits, offering insights for adolescent-focused interventions aligned with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being).

Tackling an often-overlooked challenge, *“Mental Health Among Adolescents in Umlazi: Findings from the ARISE Study,”* Dr Nonzuzo Mbokazi focused on depression and anxiety among adolescents, especially those affected by poverty, gender inequality, and educational exclusion. The study employed validated tools and Structural Equation Modeling to analyse data from 2,001 adolescents. Findings showed that higher socioeconomic status was linked to lower mental health distress, while females and older adolescents reported higher symptoms. The results support the need for integrated, gender-sensitive, and accessible mental health interventions.

Turning the focus to community partnerships, USINGA's community coordinator, Zandile Msimango presented, *“Community Engagement for Sustainable Participation,”* which explored USINGA's strategies for fostering meaningful and long-term community involvement. Lessons drawn from Umlazi illustrate how collaboration with Community Advisory Boards and local stakeholders contributes to a sustainable and responsive surveillance system, while highlighting the challenges and enablers of this collaboration.

Demonstrating leadership by example, Dr Nompumelelo Mbele, Nodal Director of USINGA, also contributed to the conference by presenting her research titled *“Fertility Trends in South Africa”*. The presentation examined fertility trends linked to marriage and cohabitation, reflecting the changing patterns of family formation in South Africa, including declining marriage rates, rising divorce rates, and an increase in cohabitation.

From addressing immunisation gaps and adolescent health, to tackling climate-related risks and demographic shifts, USINGA's participation at PASA 2025 and its ongoing work reflect a deep commitment to translating data into community-centred solutions. With continued support, USINGA is well-positioned to scale these initiatives and further strengthen health and development outcomes in Umlazi.