



In Conversation with Tinofa Mutevedzi

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[Tinofa Mutevedzi, Operations Manager: SAPRIN](#)

In this edition of the SAPRIN Connection, we speak to Tinofa Mutevedzi, the Research Operations Manager at SAPRIN.

Tinofa has been involved in SAPRIN since its conceptualisation in 2018. As the head of Research Operations, he works tirelessly to bring to life the vision of a national population research infrastructure. He has played a crucial role in setting up SAPRIN which has expanded from 3 founding Health and Demographic Surveillance Systems (HDSS) to a network of seven nodes.

Tinofa had his heart set on becoming a social worker and was excelling at his BSc degree at the University of Zimbabwe, when a chance encounter with a demography Professor made him rethink his career path. In his second year he bumped into a lecturer and knocked the papers that she was carrying. While helping to pick up the papers, she told him she was a Professor of Demography and had returned from the United States.

She explained that she was establishing a new masters programme in Demography and Population studies, supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Intrigued by this field, the seed was planted and Tinofa registered for some demography courses and his application into the MSc in Demography was successful.

He recollects pursuing his masters at a time when the UNFPA was actively promoting the relevance of demography programmes across Africa, resulting in numerous consultancy projects commissioned by government departments and UN agencies. As a student he often worked as a research assistant on these projects and gained invaluable field and analytical experience. The deeply immersive model of learning ignited his passion for research. It was the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and a lot of his work focused on this area. During the second year of his masters he began his first full-time job as a Research Manager at the Biomedical Research Training Institute (BRTI), marking the beginning of his research career.

Since then, Tinofa's career has seen him work as a Clinical Trials Programme Coordinator at the University of Zimbabwe's UZ-UCSF Research Programme. Here he was instrumental in setting up the programme from scratch including human resources and operational systems.

He moved to the Africa Health Research Institute (AHRI) as the Head of the Population Research Department in 2003. Here he transformed the HDSS addressing challenges and effecting changes to the operational set up. He put in place quality assurance systems and dealt with delays in the completion of annual work.



Tinofa is credited with spearheading the digitisation process of the paper-based questionnaires. He describes the process as a marvel which saw approximately 7 million hardcopy pages scanned and linked to records in a database. He also led the introduction of telephonic data collection, making AHRI HDSS the first in the world to implement this method. He left behind a legacy with an operational set up largely engineered by him.

Tinofa has also worked on a wide range of consulting projects rendering services as a data scientist, quality assurance consultant, grant reviewer and co-principal researcher.

In his current role as Research Operations Manager at SAPRIN, he has played a pivotal role in developing the network to its current form. He is an integral player as SAPRIN embarks on its next phase of strategic plan implementation. His contributions include co-authoring the SAPRIN Core Protocol and this formed part of the funding application to the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) under the South African Research Infrastructure Roadmap (SARIR) programme.

Tinofa explains that his early involvement in SAPRIN has given him a deep understanding of SAPRIN's operational systems, including its budgetary framework. A highlight for him was developing the harmonisation principles that define the minimum core HDSS platform across all seven nodes, ensuring standardisation and comparability. "I applied these principles to align the founding nodes, Agincourt, AHRI, and DIMAMO, a challenging but rewarding process, as each node initially sought to retain its legacy systems."

He has also led the establishment of the four newer HDSS nodes: GRT-INSPIRED, C-SHARP, USINGA, and BAMMISHO, guiding them from setup to operational readiness. In addition, Tinofa has designed and implemented the SAPRIN Operational Audit as a quality assurance mechanism. He has also developed the SAPRIN Ethics Framework to ensure ethical consistency across all nodes.

In his current role he uses his expertise and applies innovation and strategic thinking as he diligently executes his tasks, which affords him considerable autonomy. His work entails working across diverse HDSS nodes with distinct organisational cultures and structures and he finds this intellectually and professionally stimulating. Tinofa adds that it offers valuable insight into how varying institutional contexts shape operational practices and influence research outcomes.

On the importance of SAPRIN, Tinofa emphasises that, "HDSS work has played a critical role in addressing major disease burdens such as HIV and TB. SAPRIN's ability to implement this at a national scale is particularly significant. By integrating seven HDSS nodes across the country and placing approximately 1% of South Africa's population under continuous longitudinal surveillance, SAPRIN provides a unique and powerful infrastructure platform that is essential for generating timely, policy-relevant data to advance equitable health and social wellbeing, particularly in under-resourced communities."

The impact of SAPRIN he reiterates has been substantial. He explains that the founding HDSS nodes have significantly shaped health policy in South Africa. "For example, in the early 2000s, AHRI contributed critical evidence supporting the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, and later informed HIV treatment and care strategies. Agincourt has provided key insights into the population-level effects of national policies such as salt and sugar reduction," he elucidates.

“HDSS platforms function as real-world laboratories where the effects of government interventions, such as social grants, water access, and electrification, can be rigorously assessed. Moreover, these nodes play a vital role in building local research capacity and creating employment within the communities they serve,” stresses Tinofa.

Mentorship comes naturally to Tinofa, and he mentors all the HDSS nodal research operations managers to develop comparable skills and expertise. Their community of practice forum meets monthly, providing a platform for peer learning and targeted training based on a thorough needs assessment of these managers.

He is also leading efforts to professionalise data collection by redefining the role from "fieldworkers" to "field research assistants." Tinofa is concurrently collaborating with a university to establish a diploma programme in Surveillance Data Collection, aimed at formalising and elevating the skill set within this field.

Tinofa is a perfectionist with a strong commitment to quality, guided by the principle of completing work correctly the first time. Striving for perfection is his mantra and it is clear in his performance.

On a personal level Tinofa serves as an Ordained Elder in the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA), a position that carries significant spiritual and leadership responsibilities within the faith community. He runs marathons regularly, to maintain his health and as a personal challenge. He is also a passionate football supporter, following Chelsea FC in the English Premier League.

Tinofa shares that he strives to leave a lasting legacy in every role, marked by impactful contributions and enduring relationships.

