



USINGA and ARISE bring together stakeholders to champion adolescent health and nutrition

By Sindisiwe Ngobese and Olwethu Mlangeni

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

On 29 May 2025 the [Umlazi Surveillance Initiative to Nurture Grassroots Action \(USINGA\)](#) and the Africa Research, Implementation Science & Education Network (ARISE) hosted a high-impact hybrid stakeholder engagement at K-RITH, University of KwaZulu-Natal. The event brought together an impressive range of partners from government, academia, NGOs, and development sectors to explore adolescent health and nutrition in South Africa and beyond.

Participating stakeholders included the KwaZulu-Natal Office of the Premier; Departments of Health, Social Development, Agriculture & Rural Development, Basic and Higher Education, and COGTA; Stats SA; CAPRISA; CDC; UNICEF; UNFPA; WHO; SAMRC; DAC; UKZN Sport; and the Foundation for Professional Development. Academic institutions represented included UKZN, UNIZULU and MUT.

The aim of this collaborative gathering was to share research findings, align priorities and create new opportunities for partnerships around adolescent health, demographic surveillance, and evidence-based policy.

Dr Nompumelelo Nzimande-Mbele, Director of USINGA and Principal Investigator for the ARISE project, opened the event with a compelling presentation on the USINGA role within the South African Population Research Infrastructure Network (SAPRIN). As the only urban Health and Demographic Surveillance System (HDSS) node in KwaZulu-Natal, USINGA provides real-time data from Umlazi Wards 79 and 82, informing policy and planning through continuous population monitoring.

She shared key baseline findings and emphasised the value of this data in guiding multi-sectoral collaboration. Stakeholders were invited to identify areas of interest where they could engage with and leverage the existing data to support their work with the aim of fostering development in the region.

Dr Nzimande-Mbele also introduced the ARISE Network, a sub-project within USINGA. This multi-country research initiative spans eight HDSS sites across Sub-Saharan Africa, uniting partners in a shared mission to improve adolescent health through data and innovation. She further shared the ARISE baseline results, which sparked strong interest.





Ms. Sphindile Machanyangwa, ARISE Project Manager, presented on ARISE's co-design approach, which puts young people at the heart of intervention development. The project emphasises participatory research methods and localised pilot testing to ensure relevance and impact.

Her presentation highlighted pressing challenges in the region, such as unsafe environments, limited physical education in schools and economic barriers to participation. She also spotlighted opportunities to improve adolescent well-being.

One particularly exciting initiative currently underway is *eKasi NutriFit*, a TikTok-based campaign promoting physical activity in safe indoor settings. Designed with and for youth, the programme aims to overcome social and infrastructural challenges through creativity and accessibility.

This initiative was identified by adolescents with the goal of promoting health and nutrition literacy. TikTok was selected as the most effective platform by the youth themselves, recognizing the significant amount of time they spend on their phones and the potential of social media to reach their peers.

Dr Nolwazi Dlamini, Director of Population and Development at the Department of Social Development, outlined key policy imperatives that align with the USINGA/ARISE mission. Central to this effort is the Africa Think Tank, a bold initiative focused on translating research into actionable policy options.

The Think Tank's work includes policy evaluation (e.g., sugar-sweetened beverage taxation), creation of policy briefs, and the establishment of Special Thematic Working Groups (STWGs) focused on critical areas such as nutrition, sexual health, mental health, and gender-based violence.

Dr Dlamini emphasised that with Africa's growing youth population, now is the time to invest in health, education, and job creation to unlock the continent's full potential.

Ms Ronel Sorgenfrei, Assistant Director at the KZN Department of Health provided an in-depth look at ongoing child and adolescent nutrition efforts. Her presentation covered the Integrated Nutrition Programme (INP) and the province's multi-tiered approach to combating malnutrition. Key areas of focus included:

- Policy Alignment with the National Development Plan, SDGs, and the Medium-Term Strategic Framework.
- Key Interventions, such as breastfeeding promotion, ECD nutrition planning, and the Family MUAC Project for early detection of malnutrition.
- Research conducted in multiple districts (King Cetshwayo, Harry Gwala, eThekweni) analyses stunting, wasting, and obesity prevalence among children.
- New Developments: A Youth and Adolescent Nutrition Framework is currently being developed to guide school-based programmes, media campaigns, and data monitoring tools.



[Ms Sphindile Machanyangwa,](#)
[ARISE Project Manager](#)





Attendees of the USINGA ARISE stakeholder engagement

The stakeholder engagement was marked by vibrant Q&A sessions, robust discussions and a shared vision for collaborative impact. Notable outcomes included the Department of Education’s response indicating alarm by high school dropout rates, the Department expressed interest in partnering to reach adolescents more effectively.

This event reaffirmed the power of cross-sector collaboration, real-time surveillance, and community-based research in shaping a healthier future for adolescents across the region.

Ms Sibonelo Maluleka from the Department of Social Development’s HIV Directorate said, “Thank you for such an informative presentation. As I listened, I kept thinking — where have you been? This is exactly the kind of information we need to better understand and respond to the social issues we face. At the Department of Social Development, we use a site-based model across provinces, and I can clearly see opportunities for collaboration. This could really strengthen our impact moving forward.”

As the session wrapped up, one message was clear: the path to better adolescent health is through unity, innovation and evidence-based action. By creating inclusive spaces for dialogue and co-design initiatives like USINGA and ARISE are not only generating vital data but they are fostering a movement.