



Prof. Khangelani Zuma
Divisional Executive

Human and Social Capabilities

Human and Social Capabilities (HSC) is one of three research divisions of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). Serving South Africa for more than 50 years, the HSRC is the largest research institute in Africa focusing on the social sciences and humanities. It produces and disseminates knowledge that contributes to policy options and programmes on poverty alleviation, solutions to reduce inequality, and innovations for employment creation. More than just a research generator, the HSRC's divisions and centres work towards research use for policy and impact. Collaborations and partnerships are mission critical and include local, regional and international public, private and community entities.

IMMEDIATE IMPACT:

People's experiences under lockdown formed a big part of the HSC's research work in 2020 and 2021. The results from the various studies informed the COVID-19 Command Centre's decision-making regarding regulations and levels.

The HSC division responds to South Africa's challenges in the area of human and social capabilities as these pertain to the intersection of health and wellbeing, and identity and belonging. The HSC's work responds to the Medium-Term Strategic Framework priority areas of education, skills and health; social cohesion; safe communities; and a better Africa and world.

Our work

The HSC team explores the lived experiences, challenges and opportunities faced by under-served, vulnerable and marginalised communities, with the aim to understand how they navigate their identities and sense of belonging. A need exists to promote optimal mental and physical health as an outcome of this understanding, as well as an obligation to create conditions in which citizens can survive, thrive, and be well for the country to achieve social cohesion and social protection.

- *Our research work looks into how agency, attitudes, aspirations, capabilities, and other psychosocial factors reinforce or liberate people from the constraints imposed by the social environment. Thus,*
- *how can South Africans reach their aspirations and live a life that helps the country achieve its goals.*

Focus areas

Health and wellbeing

Research focuses on the impact of poverty and unbalanced income distribution, gender and violence, underdevelopment of community infrastructure, the longer-term impacts of the apartheid system and development of interventions of health promotion and prevention of illnesses. Attention is given to spatial differences that reinforce separation and inequalities and seek to understand how people navigate their health and wellbeing for the purposes of developing policies and practices. Research themes include health surveillance, health promotion and health systems research, and social and biomedical issues of health and disease.

Identity and belonging

Identity is understood as individual, social and political and as shaped by social categories such as race, gender, sexuality, class, ability and age. Research themes include race, identity in society and systems in transition; genders and sexualities; and under-served, vulnerable and marginalised communities.

Centre for Community-based Research

The centre's core comes from the rural Sweetwaters office that has conducted community-based intervention research in the Greater Edendale area of KwaZulu-Natal for the past 15 years. The centre aims to improve health and wellbeing of the public by primarily undertaking intervention trials, generating evidence, developing novel approaches and methods through the combination of social and biomedical sciences, and to serve as a hub for capacity building and training. One centre highlight involved briefing the South African Ministerial Advisory Committee on how differentiated service delivery models could support social distancing and home lockdowns.

Project snapshots

- The HSC division conducts multi-country research that are funded by different agencies, for example the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, among others.
- The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, a United States governmental initiative, and the CDC fund the People Living with HIV Stigma Index. The index measures stigma and discrimination experienced by people living with HIV in three provinces in South Africa. Data focus especially on underserved and marginalised communities (i.e. transgender people; sex workers; lesbian, gay, and bisexual; people with disabilities; people who use drugs); and access to healthcare, education and rights.
- One of the division's flagship projects is the HIV/AIDS Prevalence Survey, implemented for the sixth time since 2002. This study has provided valuable information to South Africa and Africa. It covers the level of the HIV epidemic in the country, the dynamics of HIV infections, identifying who are the people who are affected and who are worst affected. It also measures a number of aspects of the HIV epidemic, including the prevalence of HIV, the rate at which people would get infected with HIV, and the number of people who are actually taking antiretroviral treatment. The research indicates or estimates the number of people who are drug resistant, offering information that informs which drugs to provide or how the treatment should change. The research also highlights misconceptions that exist around HIV, as well as the attitude towards people living with HIV. For example, the study shows that attitudes have changed positively over the years.
- Despite the COVID-19 restrictions, the Centre for Community-based Research has maintained its focus on delivering high-quality large-scale behavioural and biological community-based interventions and research projects. In the Delivered Health Project, for example, all research activities were paused, but lifesaving HIV and chronic medications were still collected at primary healthcare facilities and delivered to people's front doors throughout all phases of the lockdown. This was done in coordination with the KwaZulu-Natal District Department of Health and in the service of the community in which the study is taking place.
- Other projects include a geospatial tuberculosis (TB) data analysis funded by the National Research Foundation; an internationally funded community-based TB screening and diagnosis using novel triage tests; co-designing community-based information and communications technology interventions for maternal and child health in South Africa; and an ongoing longitudinal study looking at perspectives on COVID-19 and lockdown.

If you are interested in seeing South Africa as a country achieving the goals of a healthy society, a just and equal society in every respect, and a cohesive society, partner with us. We conduct research in this transdisciplinary intersection on policy and programme-relevant research that helps the country improve health, improve the wellbeing of people, and promote a socially just and socially cohesive society.

~ Professor Khangelani Zuma, Divisional Executive