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Impact Centre

WHAT IS IMPACT? This seems like a simple enough question, but even global organisations struggle to quantify, qualify and define 'impact'. It cannot be gauged linearly because so many other events and collaborators might contribute to the eventual impact in a society. How does an organisation then confidently say, 'We did that'? This is one of the key questions the Impact Centre is tasked to unpack. Another is, how does impact look like in South Africa and Africa, how does it differ from developed countries? What are some of the unique ways in which the lenses that we bring from this continent might be useful in a global conversation and understanding of impact? Looking at other literature, the centre has adopted the following as a definition of impact: *The theory and practice of using research as a means to make a positive difference to human life.*

The Impact Centre is part 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.

The HSRC Impact Centre was born from the HSRC's re-alignment early in 2020. The centre responds to the increasing need for the work of role players in the National System of Innovation to be more visible, while clearly illustrating their impact – the tangible difference they make – in a society not necessarily science-aware.

The Impact Centre's mission is to draw on diverse perspectives, skills and partnerships to generate, measure and communicate impactful research on critical challenges facing South Africa and the world.

Our work

Internally, the Impact Centre works closely with the rest of the HSRC. Externally, it aims to occupy the conceptual leadership space on impact within the broader National System of Innovation, and become an international thought leader in the impact research environment.

This entails working with public and private sector stakeholders to develop an understanding of scientific evidence; stimulate public debate and engagement through communicating and disseminating fact-based findings to stakeholders and publics; conduct imaginative, timely and impactful projects; improve access, use and uptake of knowledge; enhance community ownership and use of research; and catalyse policy learning, innovation, and action.

- *The greater the degree of involvement of strategic stakeholders in the research enterprise, the greater the chances that new knowledge being generated will be used, that strategic partners will see and understand impact, that important research projects can be resourced over multi-year periods, and that sustained research can lead to impact in communities.*

Focus areas

Science in society

Conceptualising and understanding impact and what it means to be doing research where knowledge production, in the context of fake news and the shifting role of research, is changing. What does this mean for impact and what resources do researchers need now?

Impact assessment

Focusing on methodological issues, e.g. how to measure impact not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively. Looking especially at the HSRC's big surveys, such as HIV, and food security. Considering other social science methodologies to understand and correctly measure impact.

Strategic partnerships

The HSRC's work necessitates working with multiple stakeholders – from funders, to government and other science councils. Considers the best fit to leverage the HSRC's research for optimal benefit and impact. Key is bringing partners onboard early in research, thinking more strategically about value-driven partnerships.

Communications

Looking at the best way to translate, disseminate and communicate research findings to the rest of the world. How to increase visibility and understanding by making use of all the platforms available in this digital age. Includes empowering researchers to make their work accessible.

IN ESSENCE: Impact is not a job for the Impact Centre. Every researcher is tasked with planning their research with impact in mind. It fundamentally shifts the way in which we conduct research and engage with society. It challenges researchers to think about their changing role as knowledge producers.

Project snapshots

- With a big part of the Impact Centre's work focusing internally, it makes sense that a key imperative is to help researchers think about their role and understand the role of knowledge producers in influencing, shifting and engaging with the broader community.
- Externally, the centre is looking at how to best embed an emphasis on impact early in research projects. For example, in an initiative with the University of Cape Town, a group of environmental scientists are looking at issues of climate change in a gender policy context. This is a good example of a five-year project where an impact team will be entrenched in the project from the outset. The project involves several African countries thinking about how they translate policy findings; how the African Union and other national and regional stakeholders might be engaged around climate change; how capacity can be built; and how impact with its monitoring, evaluation and impact assessments, or narratives for change form part of impact. Lastly, determining how results should be communicated and disseminated brings to life every element of the Impact Centre.
- Several projects focus on science engagement with health journalists and communicators, health information practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, and artificial intelligence and human rights in Africa.
- Other work includes the development of policy briefs, management of seminar series, the implementation of a formal research/policy engagement structure, research that explores and integrates the different ways for measuring impact, managing the HSRC's various internal and external communication and engagements platforms, and supporting meaningful engagement with partners, civil society and local communities.

Traditionally, in academic and research environments, impact has been measured in a narrow way. For example by looking at academic citations, publications in high impact journals, etc. Now, we are much more interested in how research actually has societal impact; the work that we do must touch lives, whether that means a shift in attitudes or behaviour. Can we measure it – can we look at what happened before and after? And can we, by developing our own and learning from existing best practice models, create a resource for others to use? What role can developing narratives – storytelling – play?

~ Prof. Heidi van Rooyen, Centre Executive