

What research priorities should the re-imagined university focus on?

In our current era the question is not whether we have the treatment, solution or cure, but whether people can access it. Enough people. Research should focus on improving the determinants of health and the human condition. The focus of this should be on quality, accessibility and affordability. Local solutions should be researched that could be scaled and reproduced on global scale.

The Covid-19 crisis brought attention to inequity that exist in our society and increased the risk for malnutrition. In vulnerable communities the nutrition status will be affected, and the malnourished will be more susceptible to a virus such as Covid-19. A move towards equity will improve nutritional outcomes. In many developing countries Covid-19 led to a health and nutrition crisis combined with a socioeconomic crisis. This reinforced the importance of being able to access water, sanitation, primary care and opportunities for work and education close to home. The inter-disciplinary research as part of the Informal Settlement Health service learning programs of the University of Pretoria became a critical component of care delivery during 2020. The program that has been run for almost a decade through departments that include Family Medicine, Architects, Engineering, Nursing, Dietetics, OT, Speech and Language Pathology, Physiotherapy and students from a number of other disciplines, during Covid became first responders with a protocol for community engagement and Covid related health and social support on-site within communities being diploid within two week of the first lockdown and continuing throughout the year. This is being expanded on as a five year food system research project through Centre of Excellence, COPC research unit and a combination of inter-disciplinary departments named Imvelo (From the Earth). Research that is local, should be rooted in communities to influence the fabric of society.

How do we engage through research the wicked problems of society?

The opportunity for research to contribute to evidence- based knowledge will be crucial to strengthen these efforts and to scale up the inter-disciplinary, inter-partner approach employed to mitigate the effects of Covid and our current times on society. Nutrition as an indispensable part of health, food, education, and economic development should be understood in the new normal after the crisis. The importance of accessing health care locally within your community and also being able to continue school or work where you live (instead of travelling across borders and long distances daily should all be considered in how and what we research, learn and develop. The Informal Settlement Health program has always had a focus on establishing local structures in communities that will address holistic health towards primary health care, nutrition and education. This translated into UP developing with partners a clinic, kitchen and training centre/school. During Covid and lockdown, these holistic health sites became beacons of hope and sources of care for thousands. People could receive primary care within a community and if necessary were followed up at home (from the outside of their dwelling) if they had to self-isolate due to Covid. Families that were food insecure were supported with food parcels and early learning could continue with Tebelo as a UP NPO partner distributing through the community health worker teams learning material that mothers could do at home for their young children who were not able to attend school during the months of lockdown. These services inform research and vice versa. One has to

ask how the post-Covid cities should look like? How South Africa and the world can affordably and equitably devolve the services required to keep local communities going (and thriving)? These are the research questions that will be explored in the next few years. And not only in theory, but with communities and withing our cities, towns and informal settlements.

In the Global Nutrition Report (2020) UNICEF, Executive Director Fore calls for “collective efforts to ensure the most vulnerable children benefit from good diets, nutrition practices and services and that the policy, food systems and environment is able to deliver nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable diets for children, no matter where they live.”

In the South African and African context more research is required to inform and direct efforts needed to accelerate to progress in achieving the 2030 Sustainable development targets. Transforming food systems to make healthy diets, available, accessible, attractive, and safe is essential to improve fundamental immunity. This is key in improving nutritional status as a preventative measure and could contribute to establishing a resilient society. Swift action is required as good nutrition is an important element of human security and achieving sustainable food systems will protect lives and dignity. During Covid-19 the University of Pretoria, Community Oriented Primary Care team has seized the opportunity to work towards participating in the debates and were active in the efforts to “rebuild, and reshape food systems to be more resilient, equitable and sustainable”.

Inequity, globalisation, and urbanisation has contributed to malnutrition- both- undernutrition and overweight, obesity and other diet-related chronic diseases. The vicious cycle of malnutrition is exacerbated by the inequities in food and health systems. Increased risk of hospitalisation and death due to Covid-19 was found in people with poor metabolic health, including diabetes and obesity while undernourished people with weaker immune systems have a high risk of contracting the virus. The most marginalised rely on social services such as the local early learning centre and school feeding, which had to be reduced or stopped during this period of lockdown, thus increasing household food insecurity. Women and children particularly those who live in poor communities, fragile or conflicted areas, minorities, refugees and unsheltered people are particularly affected by the effects of Covid-19 and the containment measures.

What possible topics areas/gains become possible for transdisciplinary collaboration?

(Access to) Water and sanitation, primary care, education and business opportunity will be the pillars of health and happiness. We can do research as engineers, medical personnel, scientists and architects and teachers and almost any field/profession to explore and implement local affordable solutions with global relevance.