



COVID-19: an opportunity for cultivating a positive public relation in with science in South Africa

The world faces accelerated change and uncertainty as countries try to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. South Africa also has to contend with high levels of inequality, poverty and unemployment. Decision makers rely on science and technology-based evidence to develop policy and solutions to

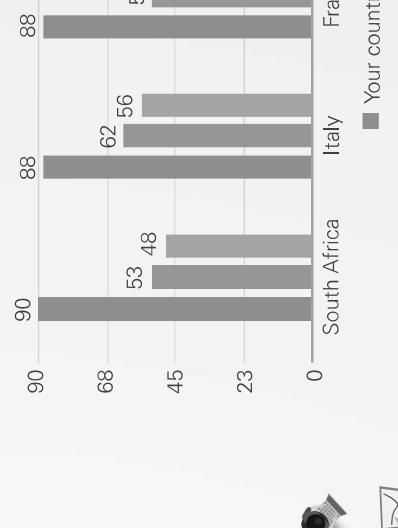
The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact. Gaining a deeper understanding of the virus and its impact globally, and how to communicate this information in multiple formats, communication messages and behavioural change information towards social and behavioural change public and science.

A positive relationship must be encouraged through these engagements should aim to facilitate mutual trust into the public-science relationship creates space for policy and intervention planning.

The public and COVID-19

Various surveys have been conducted to provide insights into the public's perception of the pandemic. We present some key findings from comparisons to other countries to highlight the importance of science. At the time of writing, these were the most common findings.

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents perceiving themselves (%)

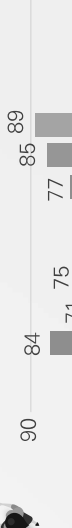


Source: Ipsos (2020)

According to an Ipsos poll conducted late in March, the threat of the virus to their country, their families and their communities was a major concern. This is as it may have been for others, or that the wider public opinion in the first few days after the announcement.

Since March, the HSRC has also been conducting surveys. An initial survey found that among 55 000 respondents, 66% felt that South Africa as a country had a high level of risk perception during the early days of the pandemic.

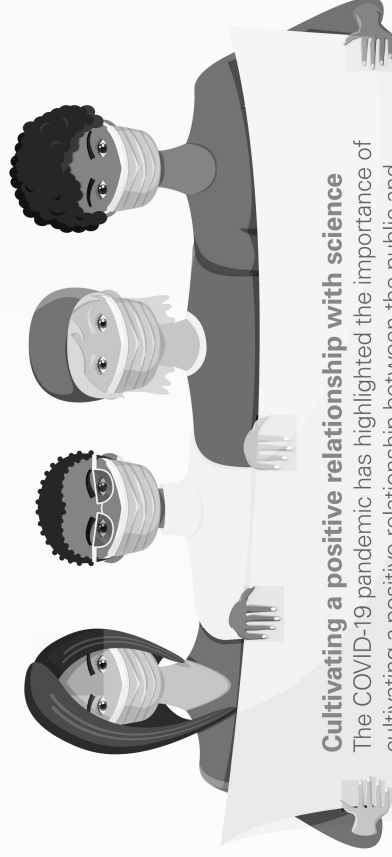
Figure 2: Trust in information sources



Taking African research to the world

Public trust in sources of information is critical to understanding the best channels for communication. According to the Ipsos poll, respondents in all countries except India showed the highest level of trust in their local health authorities (Figure 2). In South Africa, trust in TV and the national government was also relatively high. The way in which information is communicated, the accuracy of the information shared, and the impact of decisions made all affect the level of public trust.

The HSRC survey found that South Africans reported significantly higher access to internet-based media sources (40%) and traditional media access, while reported access to information from government (16%) and health authorities (6%) was very low. The public may have had further access to information from the government and from health authorities through the media. During the early days of lockdown, the government (93%) and health authorities (95%) were the most trusted sources of information among the 55 000 respondents, particularly in relation to COVID-19.



Cultivating a positive relationship with science

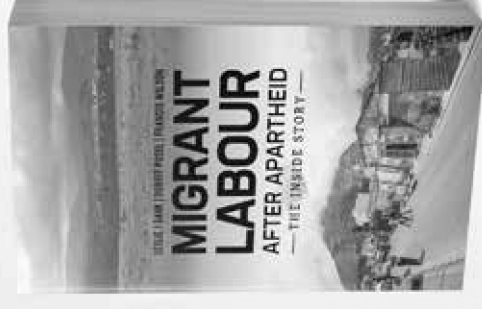
The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of cultivating a positive relationship between the public and science. Public engagement will be critical in addressing this crisis and contributing to the country's long-term social and economic recovery. The modes of information creation, dissemination and application now occur within a different social context. Understanding the antecedents of these processes becomes increasingly important. Beyond this, a population interested in, while similarly critical of scientific developments, policy and social influence, remains the primary objective. The public relationship with science, together with public sentiment in response to changing contexts, remains the key feature of a society best able to demonstrate resilience and objectivity, particularly in times of significant emergency and disruption.

Where to next?

Public engagement with science is crucial for a trusting, scientifically literate and critically engaged public. The HSRC has had a longstanding relationship with the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) on research associated with the public relationship with science. The DSI's *Science Engagement Strategy* highlighted the importance of public engagement with science and technology, and the *2019 White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation* recommended the establishment of a long-term monitoring and evaluation (M&E) programme of system-wide science engagement and an institutionalised survey on public perceptions of science. The HSRC, in collaboration with DSI, has developed a Science Engagement M&E Indicator Framework and published a report, *Science and the Publics: Mapping Public Relationship with Science Surveys*, which explored empirical, theoretical and policy formulations directing science engagement in South Africa and around the globe.

Migrant Labour after Apartheid

The inside story

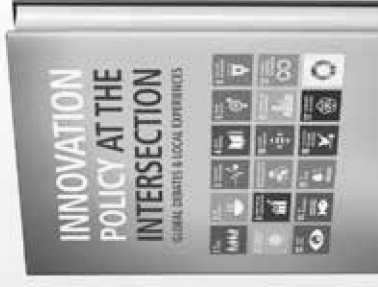


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