ARASA SRHR Research Symposium

Concept Note

Venue: Johannesburg, South Africa
Dates: 21st – 23rd May 2024

1. OVERVIEW

AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa (ARASA) in collaboration with its partners shall be hosting a three-day research symposium from 21st to 23rd of May 2024 in Johannesburg, South Africa. The symposium will attract over 200 CSO representatives, researchers, funding partners, government representatives and various stakeholders. The symposium will bring together experts, researchers, practitioners, and professionals to discuss and exchange knowledge, research findings, and insights on the impact of mega trends on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights -SRHR programming in East and Southern Africa region.

2. CONTEXT

This year's ARASA Research Symposium is an outcome from the Regional SRHR Symposium held in Johannesburg, South Africa in March 2023. As part of the Accountability Framework (Position, Priorities), the delegates recommended as a way forward, for the regions to generate evidence regarding the intersectionality of mega trends, sexual and reproductive health and rights and access. The key mega trends are: The Digital Divide, Migration and Climate Change.

The 2023 SRHR Symposium noted that a lot is being done by CSOs on advocacy in the ESA region, however, there is dire need for evidence and data driven advocacy and research. The symposium also noted that there is a missing link between research institutions, academia and CSOs interventions. Currently, the development sector is implementing work based on limited evidence. ARASA and its partners would like to bridge the information gap where researchers/academic institutions, CSOs and governments work together, and the missing information finds its position and priority into the advocacy spaces.

Access to SRHR and HIV prevention efforts has been adversely affected by pandemics and epidemics. This symposium will explore the existing nexus between SRHR, HIV prevention and pandemics as we co-create sustainable and inclusive pathways for community led health systems strengthening.

It is against this background that ARASA aims to conduct a 3-day convening that will incorporate multiple arenas of expression and discussion through the exhibition, research presentation, dialogue and experience sharing communicated through various media.

2.1. Why mega trends?

2.1.1. Climate change

Part of the Agenda at the COP 26 was the discussion on the need to work together to enable and encourage countries affected by climate change to protect and restore ecosystems, build defences, warning systems and resilient infrastructure and agriculture to avoid loss of homes, livelihoods and even lives. The statement puts more responsibility for protecting and restoring the ecosystem on the countries affected by climate change rather than those causing global warming, which on its own is a reverse of responsibilities. Climate change and development are intertwined; we cannot talk about health, peace, gender etc without bringing in issues of climate change.

Climate change and other natural disasters pose major threats to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Droughts, water insecurity, floods and landslides, severe tropical storms and hurricanes, and protracted humanitarian crises displace millions of people; increase food insecurity and vulnerability to diseases; disrupt the provision and use of services; and lead to an upsurge in gender-based violence (GBV). These factors disproportionately affect women and girls, children, older persons, and other key and vulnerable groups. Recent trends show an increase in the number and extent of humanitarian emergencies, with the number of people needing humanitarian assistance swelling from 137 million in 2017 to 235 million in 2021. Access to health services, SRHR, UHC, HIV and TB prevention is compromised during climate crises.

2.1.2. Digital divide

The gender gaps in digital literacy, internet use, and mobile phone access mean SRHR remains out of reach for many women, especially those living in marginalized areas characterized by conflict, fragility, and violence – with significant mobility constraints, restrictive socio-cultural norms, and greater safety and security concerns. For women, and Africa's ever-growing youth population, to access the needed services, it is of the utmost importance that they are provided with basic skills, knowledge, and capacity to use digital technologies.[4]

To sustain the momentum from the global convening, there is a need for increased unrestricted funding to community-led innovations for SRHR and mainstreaming digital literacy programs in country-level affirmative action plans, addressing digital security including cyber bullying and harassment. Prioritizing research and data for decision making across the health tiers is also critical especially for SRH financing.

2.1.3. Migration

In Africa, there were approximately 25 million international migrants in 2017, an increase of 3% since the year 2000. Within Africa, the share of international women migration increased from 45% in 2010 to 48% in 2017. Most of the migrants are in the reproductive age group (15—49 years) with the average age of international migrants being 39 years. The migration of people of the reproductive age group has important implications for public health and in particular, access to and utilisation of SRH services.[5]

Existing literature has shown that inequalities exist in utilisation of SRH services between migrants and non-migrants. Being a migrant has been associated with compromised utilisation of health care, including SRH services. [6]

Migration experiences in Africa are deeply and profoundly gendered. More than 40% (estimated) population of regional migrants are women and girls. Women are increasingly migrating alone or as heads of households. Female migrants face major risks, including sexual exploitation, trafficking, and violence. Globally, all migrants are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, but female migrants are particularly more at risk. Women and girls account for 71% of all human trafficking victims, according to the 2016 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Research has proven that women do not stop getting pregnant while they are on the move. These challenges are more intense for the migrants LGBTQ+ communities. East Africa accounts for 30% of the continent's total migrant population of 26.6 million, with economic migrants and refugees making up three-quarters of those on the move.[7]

3. OBJECTIVES

The objectives for the meeting will be:

> **Sharing Best Practices:** Creating opportunities to share and demonstrate best practices, regional progress, models, and policy reforms on addressing SRHR gaps in relation to climate change, migration, and digital divide.

> **Developing a Roadmap:** Based on data and evidence, to collectively develop a framework that will inform regional position and priorities, decision making and advocacy priorities regarding Climate change, migration and digital divide and their impacts on SRHR.

> **Generating evidence:** To generate knowledge and evidence on the 3 mega trends and their symbiotic relationship with SRHR in the ESA region as well as facilitate opportunities for networking, collaboration amongst institutions, academia, CSOs, human rights defenders etc.

> **Space:** Forming spaces and facilitating platforms

4. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO ATTEND?

ARASA and its partners remain key to its work and in convening safe spaces to tackle the current issues and context. The symposium will attract:

a. Research institutions and academia as well as individual researchers
b. Partner organisations and Civil Society organisations
c. Parliamentarians in East and Southern Africa and secretariats (SADC and EALA, EAC).
d. Ministries of Health, home affairs, technology, migration, ICT and NAC Directors.
e. National Human Rights Institutions.
f. Media practitioners
g. Activists, human rights defenders
h. Private sector
i. Traditional and Religious Leaders.
j. Development partners, among others

5. STRUCTURE OF THE SYMPOSIUM (HOW)

The symposium will leverage ARASA's regional partnership of a diversified constituency that include research institutions, grassroot, local, and national organisations up to regional levels. ARASA will convene an inclusive and diverse group made up of:

a) Influencers and Policymakers: ARASA works closely with parliamentarians, National AIDS Conference Directors, secretariats in SADC and EAC, National Human Rights Institutions and regional human rights mechanisms. The support of these stakeholders is key to understanding policies and sharing best practices and challenges regarding policy advocacy as the symposium jointly looks at ways to collaborate and support each other.

b) CSO's and ARASA partners: The ARASA partners comprise a mix of more and less well-established organisations, facilitating an effective sharing of expertise between partner organisations. The ever-growing number of partners since 2004 to-date, is a demonstration of trust and belief in the goal that ARASA aims to realise and its commitment to build a robust cadre of CSOs in the region who are able to influence and impact change at community, national, regional, and international levels. The CSOs and activists will bring a community voice and evidence, anecdotal and shared lived experience to inform qualitative research and evidence. The symposium will provide a platform to share their work through exhibition, art, experience sharing, plenary presentations, case studies, among others.

c) Funding Partners – The donor community and funders will share opportunities for research and collaboration for evidence-based programming and funding streams including funding opportunities. The funders will participate in panel discussions and plenary sessions.

d) Think Tanks, media, and academics – The symposium will further cultivate relations with drivers of information, exploring synergies and areas of potential collaboration including joint collaborations for research and consultancies. The symposium identifies media as a critical pillar in communicating and disseminating such research and data.

On day 3, the symposium will provide a space to develop a roadmap for addressing the 3 mega trends and strategies on how to conduct, disseminate and utilize research to influence and reverse the tide.

In addition, ARASA aims to proactively look not just at "what worked" but also at what has not worked; discussing best practices needs to reflect on how our narrative has evolved and how proactively it has taken shape. Key questions that require discussion and reflection on messaging. The symposium aims to create a safe space by using liu;'and an external rapporteur and facilitator experienced in guiding such talks during the formal sessions. But also, it is not limiting the participants in the expression through the inclusion of a gallery for alternative expression, a café space for informal conversations and a screening lounge to showcase videos and documentaries by individuals, partners, and stakeholders.

The agenda will be grounded under three ethos-defining themes which will be integrated/presented through four streams under cross-country and cross-movement learning and regional collaboration:

> Intersectional approaches
> Looking at effective strategies moving forward as CSOs and activists across movements
> Multi-sectoral approach: deliberate collaboration among CSO, government, public
  and private sector and other sectors.

6. SYMPOSIUM THEMES

The research symposium will be hinged around 3 mega trends and their impacts to SRHR in the ESA region utilizing research to advocate for the realization as the major theme.

The symposium will be accomplished through a combination of or a bouquet of activities which include:

Exhibitions: There will be a space for exhibition during the symposium. The exhibition will entail poster presentations, exhibition space for partners.

> **Process:** Participants will submit abstracts to ARASA for poster presentations and plenary presentations, case studies.

Speak Café: At the center of the convening will be a coffee hub which ARASA is calling the "Speak Café." This is meant to be a space for contacts and networks to be solidified. It is designed to be a space where activists can connect (or reconnect) and engage in conversations in an informal setting.

> **Process:** The café will also have a stage for musicians and poets to give scheduled content performances that speaks to the convening thematic focus. ARASA firmly believes that learning doesn't only take place in formal spaces; insights and meaning can be shared in informal meetings through reflective conversations.

Plenary, panel sessions: The symposium will have various presentations through plenary presentations where presenters will share their papers in a plenary followed by a question-and-answer session.

> **Process:** The symposium will also present an opportunity for a moderated panel discussions where experts, scientists will be invited to speak on topical issues, and this will be followed by a Q&A session as well. The panel discussion will have not more than 5 panelists and will be timed to give room for a number of discussions.

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