



# Climate change, well-being and the rigour of engagement

This year has been an important one for South Africa's leadership in science. Our country hosted the [S20 meeting](#), centred on the theme of 'Climate Change and Well-being'. Many South African scientists and science administrators worked very hard indeed to make this important meeting successful, productive and inclusive. All South African scientists, and all South Africans, owe those involved our gratitude. The [final statement](#) resulting from the S20 meetings was endorsed by all members.

The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) was central in the S20 meetings, and hosted the secretariat for the meeting. Our own journal, which is the key journal published by ASSAf, holds a particular responsibility to take the lessons of S20 into the future, and to serve as a forum for publication (subject, of course, to our regular editorial policies and processes) on the S20 theme. Our core identity as an African, multidisciplinary and open-access publication makes us uniquely positioned to advance contextual work on climate change and well-being. As some of our recent special issues show (see, for example, [Sustainability Science Engagement and Engaged Sustainability Science](#), [Sustainable Food Systems and How to do social distancing in a shack: COVID-19 in the South African context](#)), along with many stand-alone contributions, applying the best science contextually, and with the benefit of multiple perspectives and approaches, seems key to dealing with difficult and complex societal problems and issues.

ASSAf plays a key role, through its many outreach and other activities, in bringing science to society and society to science, and increasing and diversifying the voices heard in debates about what science is and should be in our context. There can be no question that an 'ivory tower' approach to science and knowledge, where expertise rests just with a small group, does not make for the best applied science – multiple voices are needed. In a country with a not very distant history of systematic and legislated segregation and exclusion on the basis of race, gender, class and disability, to name just a few points of exclusion, the need to broaden participation is all the more obvious and urgent. This poses both opportunities and challenges for a journal like ours.

The opportunities are manifold, and as a journal we have over the past few years encouraged wide-ranging and multidisciplinary debates on a range of pressing social issues, as witnessed, for example, by our [Discussion Series](#), explicitly designed to host a range of viewpoints on contemporary topics. We have also expanded our support for new and emerging authors and peer reviewers<sup>1</sup>, with resources on these topics available gratis through our [YouTube channel](#), to name some of our interventions.

But the challenges are equally important. In a global political context in which right-wing populism has become associated with anti-science views, including views on climate change and on vaccination, for example<sup>2</sup>, those of us involved in science, science communication and science participation, need to be equally aware of the complexity of the task of embedding science-based evidence in broader social campaigns. Without an informed understanding of questions around politics and participation, science engagement, so key to the S20 theme of 'Climate Change and Well-being', can also go very wrong.

Scientists throughout the world are aware at this time that right-wing authoritarian regimes can, and do, create social environments in which there is an erosion of a common understanding of what is the truth, and what the procedural and evidentiary bases are for agreeing that something

is a fact or not a fact. But it is imperative, in the context of complex multilayered problems, to recognise that there is also value in hearing and trying to understand different perspectives on these problems. Unintended pitfalls can include, for example, co-option of community-based and other organisations in the service of bolstering our credibility as scientists serious about social issues. Especially in a society as unequal as ours, and where poverty is rife, relatively small incentives for community organisations to work with scientists may implicitly encourage these organisations to comply with agendas they did not set and do not want. Finding a compliant voice from what is loosely termed 'the community' is not respectful of the complexities and contestations of multiple voices in communities. We need to think about who is saying what, to whom, in what context and why. There are also issues of staging and performativity in community engagement. Sometimes scientists and community activists, whether consciously or not, may play to a co-constructed script of initial hostility and contention, with heated argument, followed by a rapprochement aligned with the views and interests of those who, not uncommonly, have the funding and other resources to stage these events – the scientists. Even more complicated and challenging is the question of who speaks for whom and on what basis various actors claim legitimacy, not only for themselves as players but also as representatives of (sometimes notional and constructed) larger groups. It is a truism of community-based research and the working even of Community Advisory Boards, however important and necessary these may be in community-based science, that these boards, by their very nature, may represent people who are not typical of communities. This atypicality may be present at the outset of a study, by virtue of board members possibly being more articulate, engaged and empowered than others to begin with. Board members may also become less and less representative of communities, less and less like those they supposedly stand for, as they become more absorbed in the scientific process.<sup>3</sup>

The issues we mention above are just examples of the challenges. Part of our responsibility as a multidisciplinary journal is to be as rigorous in our interrogation of what are often the best-intentioned participatory and community-engaged endeavours, as we are about the best-intentioned 'hard' science. For this, we need the benefits of multiple disciplines. Research using inferential statistics is built on the best of scientific scepticism – we need to know that our findings are unlikely to be due to chance. Similarly, rigorous social science approaches will not take at face value declarations that work presents or uses 'the voice' of communities or marginalised groups. Good social science interrogates, explores, considers alternative explanations, and questions even what the researchers themselves hold to be true. For good work to be done on questions of climate change and well-being, we need rigorous and transparent methods in all domains. We invite and continue to welcome submissions which show this rigour.

## References

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## HOW TO CITE:

Swartz L, Pietersen D. Climate change, well-being and the rigour of engagement. *S Afr J Sci.* 2025;121(11/12), Art. #24331. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2025/24331>