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1

ID: 03554384-01 Source Page: 3

Spotlight on Research

Tomorrow's people today

We spoke to Dr Saadhna Panday about the work of a social sciences researcher and how she hopes to influence change on matters concerning young people in South Africa.

Q & A

DR SAADHNA PANDAY
RESEARCH SPECIALIST

Q What areas of research are you involved in at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)?

A The HSRC does research in social sciences. I engage with the community to find out what problems are affecting the quality of life of young people in South Africa. Then I try to find out how big the problem is and how the community is affected and look at the factors that drive it.

We then try to put interventions in place or look for solutions. Those solutions have to be tested to ensure the best one is chosen, and that it is cost-effective.

We encourage participation from the community to do this; they need to take ownership of the solutions.

Once we have tested an intervention, we enter into discussions with the government, sometimes to influence policy or programme development. We work with partners such

as the media to try to get those solutions implemented.

Q Many young people feel disconnected from the government and feel their voices are not heard. What is your view on that?

A I think the first problem is that young people have been labelled as disinterested and unaffected from society as a whole.

I think the nature of participation among young people has changed. Young people in 1976 were very politically active because there were particular challenges then. Now the challenges are different. Young people are dealing with issues like HIV-Aids and are at the forefront of protests against the lack of HIV-Aids and ARV service delivery.

Through our various

engagements they have said that they find it difficult to communicate with the government, which is seen as unapproachable.

The government is trying to bridge that gap and we are also working with young people to give them a platform to be heard. They are responding well. There is a genuine commitment from the government to hear the voices of young people.

Platforms like the National Youth Commission or the Umsobomvu Youth Fund might not be working optimally but that does not mean they are not there.

We have a lot of work to do and we will get there eventually but it requires activism from young people.

Q Tell us what you are working on now?

A A programme called the Youth Policy Initiative. We felt that we had the research evidence to influence youth policy and project development, but didn't know how to go about this.

The job of a researcher cannot involve just producing the evidence and hoping that a policy-maker picks it up and understands it.

We have to be involved in the process. This project involves six round-table

discussions where we invite key policy-makers, programme implementers, academics and researchers and interested partners, like the media. We discuss the problems facing the youth now.

The topics are, first, youth policies and institutions such as communication between the government and young people.

The second topic is the youth bulge. We have proportionally larger numbers of young people.

The third is livelihood strategies. Two-thirds of the unemployed in our country are young people.

The fourth is pupil retention. We find that we have good access to primary schooling and we get the children into the schools, but at grade 10 they start to drop out. Every year about 1- million young people leave school and only 29 percent matriculate.

The fifth discussion, due to be held on March 15, is focused on teenage pregnancy. We have one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the world.

The sixth round-table discussion is on violence. We have very high levels of involvement by young people in violent crimes. We need to investigate why.

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1

ID: 03554384-02 Source Page: 3

Q What measures have been taken to involve young people in the discussions?

A A web-based poll is running on our website, www.hsrc.ac.za, in which young people can participate. We are also working with the Learning Channel to run SMS competitions in the Power Your Future supplement in Sowetan newspaper. We have hired a marketing company, Instant Grass, which goes out and has conversations with young people on various topics to find out what their views are. These initiatives have had a fantastic response.

Q What inspired you to become a researcher?

A I studied pharmacy at the University of Durban-Westville. Then I did my internship at a public hospital.

I found that we were seeing close to 2 000 patients a day but had no effective way of making a difference. I couldn't apply my professional knowledge.

After three months I decided I couldn't do that for the rest of my life. I needed to educate myself further. I got a scholarship to study for a master's degree in public health in Sweden.

Leaving the country was a huge eye-opener for me. I then joined the Medical Research Council and did a research report on tobacco control while registered with a university in Holland. This was the basis of my PhD. I then joined the HSRC.

Q What has been your biggest life lesson thus far?

A Not to limit myself. My career is an example that you can start off at one point and end up somewhere completely different. Work skills are generic. If you learn the principles of work, you can fit into any working environment. As long as you are open to learning and are determined to succeed.

Q Tell us something people would not expect about your career?

A When you mention research people think it is desk-bound surrounded by books. Through various research opportunities, I was invited by the African Union to write the African Union Charter. Then I was invited to the negotiations in Addis Ababa. I sat with people who would be making decisions for the youth of Africa.

I never thought I would be a part of something so

historical and influential.

Q What advice would you give to young people?

A I come from a very humble upbringing, my mother was a housewife and my father a school principal. Like most South African families we didn't have a lot of money. My parents gave us two things: education and values and these are the stepping stone into the world. My advice to young people would be make sure you get an education.

For more information on this career and others watch Career Quest on the Learning Channel, SABC1 daily from 10.25am to 10.35am or visit www.learn.co.za.

● On January 28, The Times published an interview with Nokwanda Mkhize who works on an actuarial science development programme. It was incorrectly stated that its funding donor was Systel Communications. It is, in fact, Sasria Ltd. Apologies for the error.