

# The HSRC/NRF Engaged Research Conference

22 - 24 October 2025, Birchwood Hotel & OR Tambo  
Conference Centre, Gauteng



**TITLE: Public squares for engagement: Less facilitation and more doing.**

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In many public engagement initiatives, community participation is often structured around facilitated discussions, expert-led presentations, or rigid consultation models. Public Squares for Engagement challenges this format by inviting participants into interactive, creative, and action-oriented spaces that centre doing over directing. These workshops reimagine public engagement as a co-creative practice — not just a platform for sharing information, but a stage for shared knowledge production, expression, and experimentation.

Grounded in participatory and arts-based methods, these workshops activate public squares as symbolic and literal spaces where community members, researchers, artists, and activists work side-by-side. From pop-up installations and community mapping to collaborative art-making and storytelling circles, the focus is on creating engaged encounters that are reflexive, embodied, and inclusive.

This abstract presents key insights from our ongoing series of Public Square workshops with a total attendance of over 200 people to date across three events at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University. We share lessons learned about power-sharing, co-designing beyond tokenism, and shifting from extractive to generative engagement models. We also reflect on the tensions of moving beyond facilitation and into forms of doing that embrace messiness, creativity, and collective care.

These workshops offer a vision of public engagement that is radically accessible, action-driven, and rooted in the lives and priorities of the communities we work with.

**Keywords: Participatory, public engagement, workshop, facilitation**

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## Workshop Outline: Public Squares for Engagement: Less Facilitation and More Doing

Date: 21 October 2025

Time: 14:00–16:00

Venue: Birchwood Hotel & OR Tambo Conference Centre, Gauteng

Facilitators: Prof Lynn Hendricks, Dr Bronwynne Coetzee, Dr Rizwana Roomaney, Dr Nicala Plastow

### Participants will:

1. Experience the Public Square method as an alternative to expert-led facilitation.
2. Explore arts-based, embodied, and action-oriented engagement tools.
3. Reflect critically on power-sharing and co-design beyond tokenism.
4. Leave with a personal commitment to “do” engagement differently.

### Workshop Structure

#### 14:00 – 14:15 Opening the Square

- Welcome circle: participants introduce themselves not by title but by one word, image, or gesture of what “engagement” means to them.
- Framing from the facilitators: a square is not a podium, but a stage for shared knowledge, creativity, and messiness.

#### 14:15 – 14:40 Mapping the Square

- Using participatory mapping, participants place themselves (researcher, community member, activist, policymaker, artist, etc.) on a large floor map.
- The group reflects visually on who is in the square, who is missing, and where power sits.

#### 14:40 – 15:20 Doing Engagement

- Break into smaller groups, each tasked to co-create a “mini square” around a theme (examples drawn from health, environment, education, or a theme suggested by participants).

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- Groups engage through embodied and arts-based techniques (collaborative drawing, storytelling, or symbolic enactment).
- No designated facilitator — groups negotiate inclusion, voice, and creativity themselves.

## 15:20 – 15:45 Gallery Walk and Collective Reflection

- Groups share their mini squares through posters, enactments, or installations in a gallery walk.
- Reflection prompts:
  - What surprised you?
  - How did “doing” shift dynamics compared to talking?
  - What tensions or silences remained?

## 15:45 – 16:00 Closing the Square

- Each participant writes down one shift they will make in their own engagement practice.
- Closing circle where commitments are spoken into the square.

## Technical and Logistical Requirements

- Room setup: Large open space, chairs in a circle, movable furniture for small-group clusters, wall/floor space for mapping.
- AV setup: Minimal (projector and screen for short framing slides). Microphone if the group is large.
- Materials: Flipcharts, sticky notes, large sheets of paper, markers, masking tape, and props (optional) for creative expression.
- Printed materials: A one-page handout summarising Public Square principles and reflection prompts.