Eh!woza: Working at the intersection of biomedical research, youth development and the creative industries to engage young people around infectious diseases

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Over the last two years, high rates of vaccine hesitancy have reinforced the need for public understanding, trust, and buy-in for biomedical interventions that control disease to have maximum impact. While these issues are not new, and have been a significant obstacle to controlling endemic diseases such as TB and HIV, the COVID-19 pandemic has foregrounded the need for responses that apply innovative approaches that encourage trust in scientific research and decrease stigma around diseases.

Eh!woza (ehwoza.com) is a collaborative public engagement (PE) programme that aims to contribute to this response. The organisation brings together biomedical researchers, artists, musicians, and young people living in Khayelitsha, a township in Cape Town. Underlying all of Eh!woza’s projects is the core principle of viewing participants as active partners in providing access to accurate information and stimulating dialogue around locally relevant diseases. Longer-term aims are a decrease in stigma and increasing access to accurate information. Moreover, projects have been activated as a channel to produce transdisciplinary research around how infectious diseases and how ill-health intersects with political climates, knowledge production and spatial injustices.

The presentation will start with a contextualisation of the work through a brief description of the genesis and growth of the organisation from an informal grouping of collaborators with a shared vision into an independent organisation. Participatory-produced media will be used to highlight how disease is closely linked to the social conditions in which they occur and expose the lived, often unspoken realities of people infected and affected by diseases. Finally, data from impact assessment approaches will be outlined, and how they can be implemented to better the understanding of local perceptions of infectious disease, vaccines, and health research will be described.