



The year that was 2022: Looking back and looking ahead

Last year in 2022 we introduced the ‘year that was’ editorial in which we share our reflections on the previous year and on how we did in reaching our goals for the year. As an open-access multidisciplinary journal, those goals already encompass a wide range: publish original research that is relevant to Africa, multidisciplinary, and suitable for non-specialist readers; promote the visibility of published research; and encourage academic debate and discussions. But as a journal that will be 120 years old next year, we have continually added to that list to adapt to changing times. Diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility are a global focus in scholarly publishing today, and it is important that we examine our journal’s accessibility beyond subscriptions and article-processing charges (as a diamond open-access journal we cannot do better) to make our content more accessible for visually impaired readers and readers for whom English is not their first language, and to make publishing more accessible for authors who do not have the training or the confidence to write their research and submit it, thereby improving inclusion, equity and diversity in our context. We touch on the activities we undertook in 2022 to aim to achieve these goals. Some of the reflections will be familiar to our readers; in order to reflect fully on the year, we revisit some themes we have discussed before. We acknowledge that our footprint is small, our stride is short and there is a long road yet to travel.

Publishing peer-reviewed research relevant to Africa

We have a very high desk rejection rate (79% in 2022), with many of our rejections being on the basis of submissions being out of the scope of the journal. We are a journal from and about Africa, and we are a multidisciplinary journal, so even excellent submissions that are of interest only to a very narrow subgroup of readers will not be considered for our journal and will be better placed elsewhere. Because of the criterion of African relevance, almost half (48%) of all desk rejections are submissions from authors outside of Africa, with about 23% and 29% being from South Africa and the rest of Africa, respectively.

A total of 490 original research and review articles were submitted to the journal in 2022 – 35% of these submissions were from South Africa, and 26% were from elsewhere on the continent (a small increase on last year’s 24%). We published 82 peer-reviewed articles across the eight

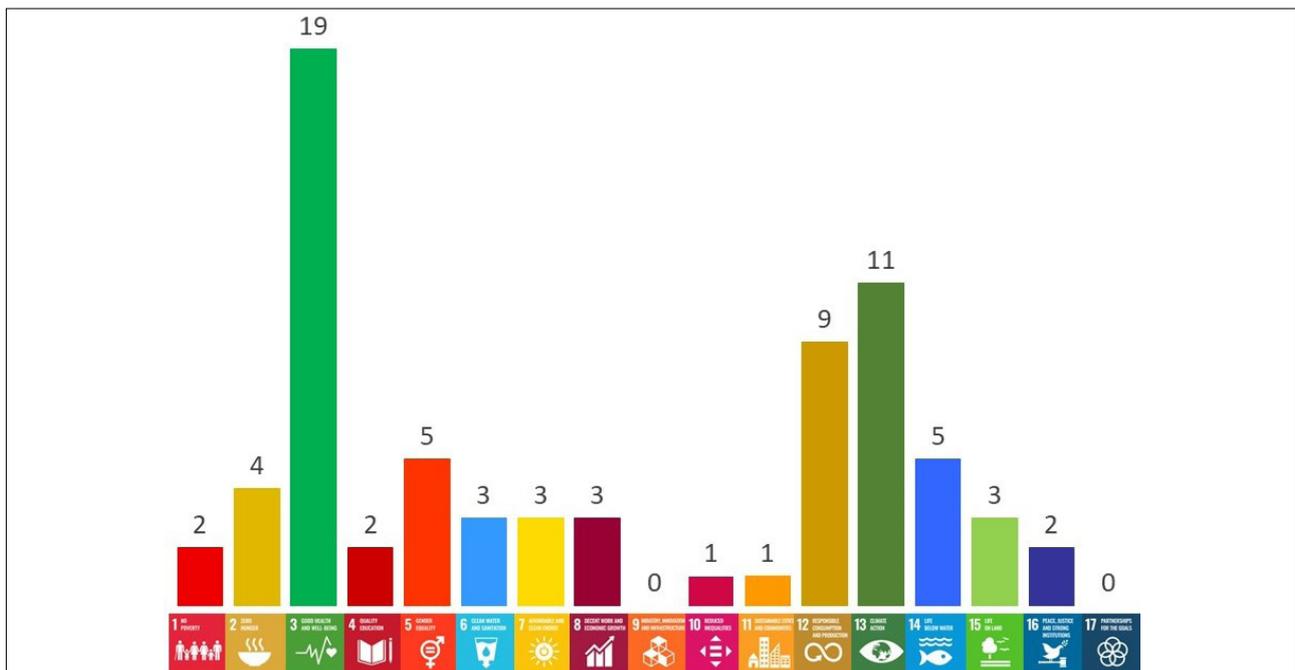
issues published in 2022. About 73% of the published authors were from South Africa, with 15% from the rest of Africa – an increase on last year’s 10%. Last year, reflecting on 2021 submissions, we indicated that we would like greater participation from African countries outside of South Africa. The small increases in the number of submissions and publications from authors from African countries outside of South Africa are encouraging, but there is scope for further improvement.

Our average turnaround time from submission to final decision (which excludes revision rounds) was 142 days in 2022. The struggle to find reviewers continued in 2022, with an average number of reviewers approached per submission in 2022 of seven – compared with an average of six invitations per submission in 2021. In total, 840 reviewers were approached in 2022, of whom 243 completed a peer review and 12 completed two or more peer reviews. In 2022, the average time to accept a review invitation was 14 days – equivalent to the time taken to complete a review after acceptance. One of our biggest challenges in improving turnaround times is the high number of reviewers invited who do not respond, either to accept or to decline a review invitation. We are again grateful to every reviewer who completed a review, as well as to those who, if unable to review, responded and recommended others. Without our peer reviewers and associate editors, we would not have peer-reviewed content to publish, and we are appreciative of their time and contributions (a list of those who reviewed for us in 2022 can be found [here](#)).

Publishing multidisciplinary research

The articles published in 2022 fall within 22 research categories, as classified by *Dimensions*, and contributed to 15 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Figure 1).

The eight issues published in 2022 – two more than our usual six issues per year – included three special issues. The first, entitled ‘How do you do social distancing in a shack: COVID-19 in the South African context’, demonstrated our commitment as a journal to bringing together multidisciplinary perspectives to address complex issues. Social and health scientists, epidemiologists and ethicists, amongst



Source: Digital Science Dimensions

Figure 1: Number of articles published in 2022 that contribute to each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

others, all made contributions with very tight deadlines. We are very grateful to our guest editorial team, Jonathan Jansen and Shabir Madhi, for demonstrating what results can accrue when editors from very different fields work together. This underlying theme of interdisciplinarity was also demonstrated in the second special issue, entitled 'Waste as a resource: South African perspectives on circularity'. This issue was done in partnership with the Community of Practice (CoP) 'Waste to Value: Transitioning South Africa towards a Waste-to-Resource Circular Economy', and it was a privilege to work with the guest editorial team from a range of disciplines on a topic of central importance to our country and our planet – another topic which can best be addressed only by multidisciplinary and communities of practice such as theirs.

The third special issue of the year was something of a departure for our journal. This issue emanated from the contributions of the HSRC Radical Reason 'Conversations with Global Thinkers' and we were exceptionally fortunate to work with Rachel Adams and Crain Soudien on this issue, which broke boundaries for us, not only in terms of methods and approaches used from social science, philosophical and decolonial perspectives, but also in terms of the structure of contributions, some of which were in the form of discussions and debates. We are committed as a journal to providing a platform for a range of voices across many disciplines because it is precisely at points of unfamiliarity and contestation that new ideas and approaches to solutions for complex problems, including questions of climate change and environmental degradation, commonly begin to grow. It is the nature of academia that there will be strong differences of opinion on a range of issues, and we welcome and support open academic debate in our journal.

Making published research visible

We have a modest, but growing, social media presence, which is focused on promoting published content and increasing its visibility and reach across a wider readership. We encourage readers to follow us on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn and to engage with us through these platforms.

We continued to issue media releases to local mainstream media ahead of the publication of each issue. Media reports on articles published in the journal can be viewed on our website [here](#). In 2022, there were 125 media mentions of published articles, with a global online reach of 6.5 million.

Enhancing accessibility and inclusivity

As a journal with an African focus, we have a vested interest in developing and supporting scientific writing in Africa. In 2022 we again provided online workshops on scientific writing and peer reviewing, and we have an ongoing monthly online forum to support new scholars in writing and peer review. These activities are free and open to all, with participation from across the globe.

This said, we are well aware of the limitations of what we do and of our reach. We regularly receive manuscripts where we gain the impression that otherwise competent authors have not, through their training and research experience, developed the level of methodological and writing skills which would be optimal for scientific publication in a global knowledge economy. Our small contribution of workshop and other support is not enough to address this issue, and we aim to have more engagements with diverse stakeholders on this issue. As always, if there are readers of the journal who wish to engage with us, please do contact us. It is a responsibility of the entire research community in South Africa and on our continent to nurture growth and excellence, and we all need to work together.

In this regard, we have received thus far only positive feedback on our [Inclusive Language Policy](#) promulgated in 2022. We developed this policy with an eye on accessibility and increasing participation in the journal and to promote [inclusion through writing](#), and we welcome feedback, both positive and critical.

Looking ahead

As a journal in a changing context, we have to grow and to change. There are challenges and opportunities. We believe it is too early, for example, to assess the likely impact of ChatGPT and similar technologies on our work. While we explore the possibility of publishing peer review reports in the future, we remain cognisant that double-anonymous peer review is important in mitigating potential bias and enabling inclusivity. For example, a recent article¹ in *Nature Ecology & Evolution* provides evidence for review outcome gaps based on author demographics. An issue raised in this article is that of the demographics of peer reviewers, something that is not always thought about.

Our journal will be 120 years old in 2024, and we are planning to use this milestone to reflect on the past and think about the future. We have so much that is excellent on which we are able to build, and we are also aware that, as the world changes in all sorts of ways, we have a responsibility to change where appropriate. Diversity, access, rigour, and debate are all key to good science and we are dependent on our readers and contributors to keep challenging us and helping us to improve. Mistakes and missteps are part of this process; the important thing for us is to be a contributing part of a community which focuses on learning and knowledge for the good of society.

Reference

1. Smith OM, Davis KL, Pizza RB, Waterman R, Dobson KC, Foster B, et al. Peer review perpetuates barriers for historically excluded groups. *Nat Ecol Evol.* 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-023-01999-w>

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