

Guidelines for Discussants of the 8th African Population Conference

Role of the Discussant

Thank you for agreeing to serve as a discussant of the 8th APC. Your primary role is to provide the audience with perspective and insight about the substance and significance of the papers. Discussants should briefly summarize the individual contributions in the papers and then move on to integrate them and relate them to the state of the science in the topic area addressed by the session.

You can do this by highlighting key ideas, identifying key themes across the papers, posing challenging questions, and suggesting important directions for future work. Synthesizing the contribution of a paper is difficult without reading it several times. Read each paper once jotting down notes about specific strengths and weaknesses. Read the paper a second time for themes. In your analysis of individual papers, note the paper's contributions and strengths as well as its weaknesses. Critically analyze what the author has done and raise questions about assumptions, methods, and interpretation of findings. Make sure to emphasize the constructive in your comments: advance the ideas in the paper by providing new ideas or perspectives to improve the paper. Your oral discussion of each individual paper should highlight major issues only. Focus your critique on issues that members of the audience will need to understand in order to integrate, interpret, and reconcile the research that has been presented. Also highlight those issues most central to the further development of the science, rather than idiosyncratic problems.

If you want to provide feedback about minor or idiosyncratic issues, give them to the authors in writing. Remember that the audience has seen only the presentations, not the full papers. If you are addressing a point that was not clearly presented by the author during the session, explain the context for your remarks to the audience. Allow yourself time to do this "on the fly" as you plan your comments on the papers. It is especially helpful to provide the authors with written feedback. Authors appreciate receiving comments and critique that is presented in an organized and thoughtful manner or a marked-up copy of their manuscript. Often papers are presented at conferences to get feedback prior to submitting for publication, and your thoughtful feedback will assist the authors in improving their work.

In presenting your discussion, stay within the allotted time. It is important for the audience to have the opportunity to ask questions. Be attentive to the chair, who is timing your comments. Both experienced researchers as well as new professionals often find themselves struggling in their role as discussant. Below is a list of some common problems as well as helpful hints for addressing them.

1. Papers are late. Before the session, check the UAPS conference website to see if papers have been posted for the session. Papers should be posted on the African Population Conference website by October 15, but some session chairs or authors negotiate later deadlines with their discussants. If the deadline has passed and one or more papers has neither been posted nor sent to you, contact the author(s) and session chair. It is the presenter's

responsibility to get the paper to you on a timely basis, but you and the chair can help by reminding authors of their responsibility to get the paper to you on time. At the session, if a paper came in too late to permit you to integrate it thoroughly into your discussion, say that. This helps to reinforce the norm of providing papers on time.

2. Papers are of varying quality. It is appropriate to acknowledge that the papers are at different stages of progression. If you note this in a developmental way, it is encouraging to authors. When critiquing the papers, emphasize how the paper can be improved, not how it is weak.

3. It is recommended to discuss a paper with the authors before the session if something is not clear to you. This will allow you to get clarification from the author(s). Furthermore, if you have a colleague who can read the paper and clarify issues for you, this can be very helpful. Otherwise, if you feel you do not have the appropriate expertise in specific areas, simply acknowledge this and discuss the paper as best you can. You have been asked to discuss the paper because of your knowledge; draw on it in the ways you feel are most productive.