

Guidelines for Discussants of the 9th African Population Conference

Thank you for agreeing to serve as a discussant at the 9th APC. Discussants play an important role in shaping the success of individual sessions by providing feedback on individual papers and making key linkages across the papers for how they relate to the session topic.

Role of the Discussant

Your primary role is to provide the audience with perspective and insight into the substance and significance of the papers presented in your session. Discussants should briefly summarize the individual contributions in the papers and 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. Typically, discussants initially read each paper to jot down notes about specific strengths and weaknesses, and then a second time to tease out themes that prevail across the papers.

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. Being constructive in your comments, even when critical, likely improves uptake of your feedback. Your discussion can advance the ideas in the papers by providing new ideas or perspectives to improve them. Your oral discussion of each individual paper should highlight major issues only. Focus your feedback 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, focus most on highlighting those issues that are most central to the further development of the science, rather than idiosyncratic issues.

If you want to provide feedback about minor or idiosyncratic issues, kindly share them with the authors in writing. It is useful to remember that the audience would have only seen the presentations, not the full papers. Therefore, in addressing a point that was not clearly presented by an 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 even in 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 to improve their work, something that is perhaps especially important for early career researchers?

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 will be timing your comments.

Both experienced researchers and new professionals often find the role of discussant to be rewarding but challenging. Below are a few typical problems as well as helpful hints for addressing them.

1. Before the session, please check the UAPS conference website to see if the papers have been posted for the session. In case the paper has not been posted, it is advised to promptly contact the author(s) and the session chair. While the presenter bears the responsibility to provide the paper to you punctually, both you and the chair can assist by reminding the authors of their responsibility to submit the paper on time. During the session, if a paper arrives too late for you to comprehensively integrate it into your discussion, it is appropriate to disclose this. This action serves to emphasize the importance of delivering papers on time.

2. Late papers. 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 **May 1st, 2024**, but some session chairs or authors negotiate later deadlines with their discussants. If the deadline has passed and one or more papers have 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 so. This helps to reinforce the norm of providing papers on time.

3. Papers of varying quality. In such cases, it is appropriate to acknowledge that the papers are at different stages of progression, and that authors are also at different stages of their careers. Noting this in a developmental way is encouraging to authors. When offering feedback, emphasize how papers can be improved, more so than just how they are weak.

4. It is recommended that you discuss papers with the authors before the session if something is not clear to you. This will allow you to obtain clarification from the author(s). Furthermore, it sometimes also helps to have a colleague read the paper and give you their take on the issues in the paper; this can be clarifying. 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.

We wish you a wonderful session!