



A SNAPSHOT: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FOOD SYSTEMS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Biowatch South Africa

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Cover: Thuleleni Zwane, an agroecology farmer in Ingwavuma, northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

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Document prepared for the Global Food Governance Working Group of the Civil Society and Indigenous People's Mechanism (CSM) of the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

Introduction

The following document represents a snapshot at the beginning of August 2020 of the impact that COVID-19 and the associated lockdown had on food systems in South Africa. This was prepared in answer to a call made by the Global Food Governance Working Group of the Civil Society and Indigenous People's Mechanism (CSM) of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) requesting that CSM members and constituencies share experiences from the ground.

The response which follows was structured in relation to guiding questions and headings provided in the call. The diverse experiences shared by civil society and social movements are being collated in a CSM policy report on COVID-19. The report aims to motivate CFS participant countries to develop an ambitious global policy response on COVID-19, as well as committing to meaningful and radical food system transformation through the policy instruments that are currently being negotiated, such as the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition.

South Africa's national lockdown in response to COVID-19

South Africa has been in a phased national lockdown in response to COVID-19 that has included five levels, with Level 5 being the most stringent.¹ The initial Level 5 hard lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020, to start only three days later on 26 March 2020. The lockdown included a prohibition on movement, except for one family member at a time who was allowed to go shopping for essential goods which were defined as food and cleaning items. This shopping could only take place locally and public transport was also limited to a few hours a day to allow essential service providers to travel to work. Any travel outside of one's immediate area required permits as an "essential service".

This hard lockdown was lifted on 1 May 2020 ushering in Level 4 (the second most stringent level). This allowed a staggered return to work for some key industries, exercise outside of one's home between 06:00 and 09:00, increasing of goods for sale to include winter clothes and some household appliances, and travel was allowed for workers in these industries. Travel was also now allowed between provinces for funerals and to return to work, provided one had documentation.

The country entered Level 3 of the lockdown on 1 June 2020. Under Level 3 people can return to work, provided social distancing can be maintained and the employer has proof of cleansing of premises. Travel to and back from work is allowed. The 9pm–6am curfew remains in place. Some regulations on restrictions have been made, and then rescinded – for example, alcohol was allowed for sale four days of the week and then banned once again; and schools were opened in a phased approach but have been closed again.

The impact of COVID-19 (including measures put in place by the authorities) on food systems, food security and the right to food

Levels 5 and 4 of the lockdown had severe impacts on food security. As the hard lockdown began with only three days' warning, and before many people had received month-end wages, they were unable to buy provisions for the stay at home period. All informal activities including sale of food were shut down and food could only be obtained at supermarkets. For people with access to their own transport or in walking distance of supermarkets this was fine, but for a majority of South Africans living in townships and rural areas this meant they couldn't access food. Many people would normally buy food through street sales or small "spaza" shops² in their local areas, or they would travel on public transport to town centres, which now wasn't available. For those who rely on weekly wages, and people in the informal economy relying on daily sourcing of income, the situation was even more dire.

Within the first week of lockdown government announced that in fact spaza shops were allowed to trade; however, both traders and law enforcement were unclear about what was permissible. It was later clarified that spaza shops needed to have municipal licenses to be open (and many do not have this) and with law enforcement taking matters into their own hands, many spaza shop owners have been intimidated and assaulted.^{3,4} Spaza shops and informal traders are essential to food security, not only providing closer access to food but also many allow buying on credit. Many outlying communities also complained that no food was being delivered in these areas so even when smaller shops were open, they were running short of food.

The lockdown was accompanied by deployment of the police and army who were encouraged by public statements from the Minister of Defence and others to take a very hard line with people disobeying lockdown rules. This deployment was mostly to poorer and black neighbourhoods where over-crowding makes social distancing practically impossible. Numerous violations of human rights and police and army brutality have occurred during lockdown and by the beginning of June, 10 deaths caused by police and army were being investigated.^{7,8}

With Level 3 the ability to access food has improved as people can now move around more freely and access public transport. However, after many weeks of little income, many job losses from small businesses that could not be sustained, and general losses in the economy, the reality is that many people are simply unable to buy food.

Increasing hunger and food insecurity

South Africa is the most unequal country in the world, with high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition.

In 2019, Statistics SA published a report on food security in South Africa as of 2017.⁹ They reported that despite South Africa being food secure at national level, almost 21.3% of South African households had inadequate or severe inadequate access to food in 2017. About 1.7 million households (6.8 million people) experienced hunger in 2017. More than 60% of these households are found in urban areas. About 2.5 million households (15.6%) were involved in agricultural activities in South Africa in 2017, mostly as a means to supplement food in the household, and most relied on social grants as their main income.

The right to food is enshrined in the South African Constitution. Section 27(1) (b) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa states that "everyone has the right to sufficient food and water" and Section (27) (b) emphasises that "the state must formulate reasonable legislative efforts and take other measures within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of these rights." The right to food requires that food be available, accessible, and adequate for everyone without discrimination. South Africa has yet to realise this right for all and the COVID-19 crisis

has markedly exacerbated the situation.

The National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM) is a broadly nationally representative survey of 7000 South Africans done every month. This has found that:

“two of every five adults reported that their household lost its main source of income since lockdown started in South Africa on 27 March 2020. This has had devastating consequences for food insecurity and household hunger. Of interviewed adults, 47% reported that their household ran out of money to buy food in April. Between May and June 2020, 21% reported that someone in the household went hungry in the last seven days and 15% reported that a child went hungry in the last seven days.”¹⁰

The Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice & Dignity Group (PEJDG) tracks the monthly expenditure of low-income households in the area of Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, and the basket of foods that these households buy. This basket of foods is priced at local retail outlets available to these families and the cost compared with the incomes, mostly from social grants, that they would access. The actual chosen basket of foods, that is downsized to fit available cash, is compared to the price of a nutritionally-adequate basket of food. The PEJDG has tracked this over many years, noting the extent to which the afforded foods are inadequate to meet household needs and the lengths households must go to in order to put food on the table, such as borrowing from “loan sharks”. In the three months of lockdown this tracking exposed large price hikes on food, especially in fresh produce and nutritional foods such as beans in what appeared to be retailer price gouging.¹¹ The average cost of these increases to a family food basket was almost as much as the increase in social grants provided by government.¹² They report that in the period from pre-lockdown (2 March) to 1 July 2020, the price of the PMBEJD typical Household Food Basket *increased by 6%*.

Government response to food insecurity

In response to lockdown crisis government announced the following social support:¹³

- An extension of SASSA Social Relief of Distress (SRD) in the form of food parcels for persons in such dire need that they are unable to meet their or their families’ most basic needs, promising to distribute 1 million food parcels.
- A Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress grant of R350 per month, for the period of May until October. These grants could only be applied for electronically, required a proof of address and were only available to recognised residents of SA and only applied to people receiving no other form of support. This excluded many.
- Other social grants were increased such that child support grant beneficiaries received an extra R300 in May and from June to October they will receive an additional R500 each month. All other grant beneficiaries are receiving an extra R250 per month for six months.

A national Solidarity Fund was also established to receive donations towards food aid, PPE and business support starting with R150-million seed funding from national government.¹⁴

While some relief was provided through the food parcel and grant schemes these measures were inadequate, even in meeting the needs of those who had lost other forms of support provided by government. One of the biggest impacts was the shutting down of the National School Nutrition Programme with the closure of schools leaving approximately 9 million children without the daily meals they were getting previously.¹⁵ A countrywide network of 235 Community Nutrition and Development Centres (CNDs) that provided cooked meals for poor people also closed during the hard lockdown.¹⁶

On 29 May the National Department of Social Development reported that 73 000 food parcels had been distributed by SASSA; 218 000 food parcels in partnership with the Solidarity Fund; and 523 000 by the national Department. Others contest these figures, saying that “national government has paid for and distributed only 73 000 food parcels

through SASSA and co-financed another 55 000 food parcels distributed through the Solidarity Fund. Most of the food parcels for poor people under the lockdown have been financed and distributed by civil society; and further that it has been mostly civil society and local and provincial government departments that have tried to provide emergency feeding schemes.¹⁷

Not only was the state unable to meet its own targets for food parcel relief, but the targets set were also inadequate to match the number of people who had lost prior food support as well as the growing numbers of people becoming food insecure as a result of the lockdown. Violent protests, fights and looting of supermarkets erupted as people scrambled to obtain food and or access to food parcels.^{18,19} The food parcel delivery process was cumbersome. Need far exceeded supply and careful need-verification procedures were put in place.²⁰ There are also widespread reports of corruption in food parcel distribution and more broadly in relation to COVID-19 support for food, PPE and other crisis support.^{21,22}

Impact on migrants and refugees

The impact on these most vulnerable sections of the population has been dire. Many migrants survive by operating spaza shops and it became clear that these were being targeted for harassment by police. Given the extreme xenophobic violence that has sporadically erupted in South Africa since 2008, many of these shopkeepers would be caught between fear of looting and violence from both local residents and the police. In general, reports of extreme violence against migrants have been on the increase as tension and desperation mount, fanned by political statements. Social relief grants also are not available to migrants, leaving many with no means of income including those stranded and unable to cross borders to return home.²³

Civil society response

Food insecurity has been accompanied by multiple other social and economic impacts.²⁴ One expression of civil society action on these has been the establishment of the C-19 People's Coalition that has sought to address these through various working groups. A food working group has been active at national and provincial levels regarding various aspects of the food system and the use of the National Solidarity Fund.²⁵

The South African Food Sovereignty Campaign, supported by COPAC, are mapping food relief efforts through self-disclosure of projects (thus not reaching all the people who have stepped in to provide food to others), but this provides some idea of civil society's role.²⁶ They have also established a National Food Crisis Forum to promote food sovereignty through promoting the food commons, food sovereignty hubs and people's pantries and are also coordinating a larger campaign for a Universal Basic Income Grant in SA. In July the Social Development Minister Lindiwe Zulu announced that government will support a universal basic income grant, which will be implemented from March 2021.²⁷ How and if this materialises remains to be seen.

Another aspect of civil society lobbying has been for replacement of food parcels with digital vouchers from the Solidarity Fund distributed via cell phone that can be spent at informal spaza shops, which will have a far wider reach, remove the logistical problems of food parcel distribution, and also stimulate the local and informal economy.²⁸ Linked to their own public donation initiatives, large supermarket chains have developed their own digital voucher systems to assist people without bank accounts to access food. Some also enable these vouchers to be used at spaza shops.²⁹ The downside of this is that these powerful corporate retailers are now making inroads into and displacing traders in the informal economy.³⁰

Farming

Although farming was declared an essential service, the lockdown impacted informal workers and smallholder producers. Many people who are employed informally or who needed to travel to their smallholdings were prevented from doing so. Those who live on their land were able to farm, but many thousands of farmers who rely on bought seed and seedlings were unable to obtain these as they either couldn't access these at smaller local outlets, couldn't travel to larger seed and seedling suppliers, or if they did manage to, the seed and seedlings were sold out. The extension service and local offices of the Department of Agriculture were mostly unavailable and closed. Smallholders who produced well and had surplus were unable to sell their produce as they couldn't access transport, were not allowed to move around without permits which were very difficult to obtain, and were prevented from selling at the informal marketing points they would previously make use of (taxi ranks, pension pay points and clinics).

South Africa has just under 2.5 million households practicing agriculture of which less than 10% are commercial or emerging commercial farmers.³¹ On 6 April 2020, the Minister of the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, Minister Didiza, announced a R1.2 billion COVID-19 disaster relief fund for small-scale farmers. While this offered hope to small farmers the process and scope of the fund was highly problematic: the application didn't allow for electronic submissions but farmers couldn't travel to department offices (which were closed anyway) and the agricultural extension officers were unavailable; the farmers had to provide proof of turnover, production figures and land tenure; and the fund only applied to those with annual turnover of between R20 000 and R1 million per annum, which excluded those most in need of support. Nevertheless, 55 155 applications were received from farmers, but the department only approved 15 036. The form of the relief was also problematic: for crop farmers, vouchers were issued that could be redeemed at large agribusiness retailers for limited types of seed and seedlings, fertiliser and pesticides. This provided next to no support for those practicing agroecological farming.

Civil society organisations responded with a submission to the Department initiated by LandNNEs and AFRA, which was submitted under the C19 Coalition umbrella and supported by 235 civil society and farmer organisations.³² The submission critiqued both the process and the one-sided support for the industrial farming model. The Department responded positively, but a promised additional fund targeting smallholders below the R20 000 per annum cut-off has yet to materialise – and may well be compromised by radical budget cuts published in the national Supplementary Budget Review (June 2020). The Supplementary Budget and the updated review were a result of the fiscal and economic impact of the national state of disaster declared as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.³³

The collective process of responding to the immediate crisis across the country and the submission on the disaster relief fund has rallied civil society around the need to strengthen the informal economy and localise food systems. Especially in larger centres connections are being made between small producers and communities in need of food, laying the groundwork for new localised production and distribution systems and highlighting the importance of urban food production.

One of the innovative projects that has started is the Ubuntu Project, which began from Orange Farm near Johannesburg.³⁴ Through donations, the project delivers fresh agroecological produce to households in need. GMO-free seed, seedlings and compost are also delivered, and households are supported with training to produce their own food and can sell their surplus when they have it. The Ubuntu Boxes of fresh produce are also sold to keen customers and the profits from this go back into the provision of the seeds, seedlings and compost.

A strong groundswell also emerged calling for support for agroecology. This has given impetus to efforts to build Agroecology South Africa (AESAs), a civil society platform for catalysing the transition to agroecology in the country. The platform was initiated by Biowatch South Africa in 2019. The first output of the AESA platform this year has been a collective response to the National Supplementary Budget supported by 52 organisations and 28 individuals. The

submission slams the deep cuts made to the budgets of the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD) and the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF). Cuts have been made to land reform (R809 million), farmer support (R733 million) and agricultural infrastructure (R506 million), and cuts of over R88 million to DEFF's Fisheries Management Programme. At the same time, the Defence and Police budgets were the only ones to meaningfully increase by a combined R5.6 billion.³⁵

The submission was followed by a media conference foregrounding producer voices. Of particular note is the testimony from small-scale fishers, who have been consistently overlooked by government support.³⁶

Further insight on the impact of COVID-19 on the food system can be read in the report by the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) – *Food in the time of the coronavirus: Why we should be very, very afraid*.³⁷

Case study on the experience of subsistence fishers in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal

The KwaZulu-Natal Subsistence Fisherfolk Forum (KZNSFF) was formed in 2003 to fight for the rights of subsistence fishers making a living by fishing in the Durban harbour and KwaZulu-Natal coastline. The forum represents approximately 12 000 fishers, many of whom live within the metropolitan area of one of South Africa's largest cities, Durban, and the busiest container port in Africa.

Over the past 100 years fishers have "subsisted" and earned a livelihood, either full-time or part-time, through fishing. A majority of the Durban small-scale/subsistence fishers are descendants of indentured labourers who were first brought to South Africa from India in 1860 to labour on the sugar estates of the British colony. Some were Masulah boatmen, who had been brought to Durban to assist the Port Captain. Since the 1860s, Indian seine net fishermen were thus active in Durban Bay, and many freed from indenture chose to settle around the harbour to continue family traditions of fishing and fish smoking and drying industries. Fishing therefore formed an integral role in the lives and culture of many of the first Indian settlers in KwaZulu-Natal. Today there remains just one seine-netting license at Vetch's Beach. Most of the fishers are rock and surf or line fishers, and still fish today using the skills taught by their forefathers.³⁸

The fishers have been at loggerheads with authorities for some time, experiencing class and race-related discrimination. The South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, and its affiliate the KZNSFF, have been fighting to have subsistence fishers recognised and for access to increasingly privatised and enclosed public fishing sites (especially post 9/11 when access to the harbour was closed for security reasons).³⁹ In 2014, the Marine Living Resources Act, which governs fishing in the sea, was amended. Three categories of fishing were identified: commercial fishing; small-scale fishing; and recreational fishing. The category of subsistence fishing was done away with. Earlier this year, 2100 fishers in KwaZulu-Natal were registered as small-scale fishers and issued with permits, forcing the remainder to access permits as recreational fishers. Under the law it is illegal for recreational fishers to sell their catch, yet most fishers take part of the catch home and sell the rest door-to-door to survive.

During Levels 5 and 4 of the COVID-19 lockdown fishing was prohibited as was the ability to move around to sell any catch. The fishing sector lobbied the Minister of Environmental Affairs, Forestry and Fisheries,

who in turn appealed to the National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC) to allow fishing under Level 3 of the lockdown.⁴⁰ Numerous letters were written to local policing representatives and the Ministry followed by an online meeting with the national Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on the 4 June.^{41,42} However, fishers continued to be harassed and even those with permits were denied access to the shoreline by local authority policing even after authorisation was given by both national and provincial authorities. Fishers were irked that police left surfers alone, while fishers were arrested. The Chairperson of the KZNSFF was arrested during this time, and his wife's laptop was seized and not returned when he was released.⁴³

To try and help those in most desperate need, the SDCEA and KZNSFF raised funds from the GAIA Foundation and Oil Change International for food parcels; distributing 120 food parcels in the first month and 100 parcels per month thereafter to the neediest families.

Endnotes:

1. <https://www.gov.za/coronavirus/guidelines>
2. "Spaza" shops are informal shops run from shacks, shipping containers or homes in residential areas that were deliberately under-developed during Apartheid.
3. <https://citizen.co.za/business/2264601/all-spaza-shops-should-be-open-and-informal-food-traders-will-be-allowed-says-ndz/>
4. <https://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/covid-19-lawyers-to-rescue-harassed-spaza-shops-45973466>
5. <https://www.news24.com/news24/SouthAfrica/News/collins-khosa-defence-ministers-skop-skiet-and-donder-comments-taken-out-of-context-court-hears-20200506>
6. <https://www.news24.com/news24/SouthAfrica/News/collins-khosa-defence-ministers-skop-skiet-and-donder-comments-taken-out-of-context-court-hears-20200506>
7. <https://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/covid-19-fury-after-citizens-roughed-up-by-sandf-saps-46077240>
8. <https://news.trust.org/item/20200609173743-w41ef/>
9. www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1856&PPN=03-00-14&SCH=7665
10. <https://cramsury.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Wills-household-resource-flows-and-food-poverty-during-South-Africa%E2%80%99s-lockdown-2.pdf>
11. <https://pmbejd.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PMBEJD-Research-Report-23062020.pdf> and see <https://www.gov.za/speeches/essential-items-19-may-2020-0000>
12. <https://pmbejd.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PMBEJD-Research-Report-26052020.pdf>
13. https://www.gov.za/coronavirus/socialgrants?gclid=CjwKCAjwmrn5BRB2EiwAZgL9ohA-9GK-QeSM6VHaQ-htstMMJyH2K37DAYBWt0YtgOJA66pxC5SkwhoCV78QAvD_BwE
14. <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/solidarity-fund-assist-vulnerable>
15. https://www.gov.za/faq/education/what-national-school-nutrition-programme-nsnp?gclid=Cj0KQCjw8fr7BRDSARIsAK0Qqr5oNQ3AwLIP8i94oc-PRB_eA3mjz6rwDHSe0d3C2PE-sdNv9TqAx70aAscpEALw_wcB
16. <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2020-06-03-feeding-the-poor-the-national-government-has-failed>
17. <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2020-06-03-feeding-the-poor-the-national-government-has-failed>
18. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-04-17-the-biggest-lockdown-threat-hunger-hunger-everywhere/>
19. <https://www.france24.com/en/20200418-violence-and-looting-point-to-food-crisis-in-s-africa-lockdown>
20. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-04-17-the-biggest-lockdown-threat-hunger-hunger-everywhere/>
21. <https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/government-to-tackle-food-parcel-corruption/>
22. <https://iafrica.com/siu-solidarity-fund-corruption-complaints-piling-up/>
23. <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/07/07/xenophobia-in-south-africa-fractures-international-working-class-solidarity/>
24. See criticism of governments response in the context of these intersecting impacts: https://www.news24.com/news24/SouthAfrica/News/furious-mps-grill-lindiwe-zulu-over-food-parcels-social-grants-20200731?fbclid=IwAR3J3czq92TSebsdoGALYkxm36d_VvHWKWXIDYkVQHjYjWuVeTn2hgrxKwS

25. <https://c19peoplescoalition.org.za/>
26. <https://www.safsc.org.za/food-relief-mapping/>.
27. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-safrica-economy-universal-incomegrant/south-africa-will-not-have-universal-basic-income-grant-this-year-minister-says-idUSKCN24W2WK>
28. <https://dgmt.co.za/food-vouchers/>
29. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-06-25-from-food-hamper-campaigns-to-digital-rands-innovative-ways-to-help-those-in-need/>
30. <https://power987.co.za/news/listen-shoprite-pick-n-pay-roll-out-spaza-shops-in-townships/>
31. Stats SA 2018 General Household Survey (<http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182018.pdf>)
32. The submission can be provided on request.
33. See the 2020 Supplementary Budget Review (<http://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/2020S/review/FullSBR.pdf>)
34. See <https://www.ubuntuproject.africa/>
35. https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vSuc0Bj4x3DFac9H1b2I_wrCdXYdcXjppN0oTI4cUmatrYWJITbEOis054F9GJBeecGSBFhvsj6ctP/pub
36. See: Naseegh Jaffer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bG2iDVkzas&t=2s> and with small fisher Solene Smith: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anF-uwZinAo&t=7s>
37. <https://www.plaas.org.za/food-in-the-time-of-the-coronavirus-why-we-should-be-very-very-scared/>
38. For more information on this history and challenges of Durban subsistence fishers see: <https://sdcea.co.za/download/let-them-eat-fish-booklet/#>
39. <https://sancor.nrf.ac.za/SitePages/The%20Exclusion%20of%20Subsistence%20Fishers%20from%20Public%20Spaces%20in%20Durban.aspx>
40. <https://www.fishingindustrynewssa.com/2020/05/22/pressure-on-for-fishers-locked-out-by-lockdown/>
41. <https://bonitechportal.com/plea-to-remove-ban-as-subsistence-fishers-battle-to-survive/>
42. Transcription of the meeting can be found here: <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/30403/>
43. Postscript: Mr Khan was released without paying bail after photos of him were taken at the police station. The charges against him were subsequently dropped; however, the laptop was only returned six weeks later after he had made repeated requests for its return and finally threatening to lay his own charges of theft against the police officers involved.