



Vulnerability in the Time of Covid-19

1. Introduction

In just a few weeks our whole world has been turned upside down as Covid-19 has shifted from being a distant possibility to a major public health issue which impacts on everyone regardless of race, class, nationality, religion or gender. This grim reality impacts on us all and how we address it depends on us all. While everyone is susceptible to the virus and none are immune, there are groups of people who are already vulnerable and on whom the lockdown will impact the most. The pandemic also brings other vulnerabilities into sharp relief.

The past few days have seen the ministers in the National Command Centre speak to various issues regarding the incidence of the virus and the measures undertaken to disrupt its spread and flatten the curve of infection. Updated regulations have been released as the country grapples with how best to achieve this. Press briefings have taken place daily as the government takes the population into its confidence and announces the measures undertaken thus far.¹ Such briefings will continue.

2. SASSA Grants

The Social Cluster has been quick to reassure beneficiaries that all social grants will be paid timeously. The Older Persons Grant and Disability Grant were paid on 30th and 31st March while the remaining grants were available on 1st April. However, many difficulties were encountered, resulting in long queues and many pensioners had to return to payment points the following day. Increases indicated in the recent budget will be paid. However, SASSA offices will be closed for the

duration of the lockdown to reduce face-to-face contact with the public, as SASSA staff need to be protected as a priority. There will be no new applications processed during the lockdown, but electronic applications can be made in the interim period.

3. Social Services and Domestic Violence

Social services to those in need will continue to operate on a national, provincial and local level. The lockdown must not affect services to women and children. Social Work is regarded as an essential service and the Department has undertaken to employ the new social workers whom they have trained but, not as yet, employed. There is a realization that enforced isolation and confinement at home renders many women and children vulnerable to domestic abuse and gender based violence. Home, for many, is not a safe place to be. The SAPS are aware that domestic violence might heighten and that the lockdown may aggravate existing tensions at home. Hitherto there has been a general failure to successfully implement the Domestic Violence Act. The President and other ministers, particularly those of Police and Social Development, have made it clear that the security and social clusters will not tolerate the abuse of women and children.

“Around the world, as cities have gone into lockdown to stop the spread of coronavirus, the mass efforts to save lives have put one vulnerable group more at risk. Women and children who live with domestic violence have no escape from their abusers during quarantine, and from Brazil to Germany, Italy

to China, activists and survivors say they are already seeing an alarming rise in abuse. In Hubei province, the heart of the initial coronavirus outbreak, domestic violence reports to police more than tripled in one county alone during the lock down in February, from 47 last year to 162 this year.”²

The prohibition on the sale of alcohol is an attempt to contain the irresponsible and confrontational behaviour that is a consequence of drinking alcohol. However, many South Africans went out in their numbers to purchase alcohol before the enforcement of the regulations, so the impact of the ban can only be assessed once the lockdown is over. Hopefully, it will inform better and more responsible drinking behaviour once the situation normalises.

4. Children

Services for the care and protection of children will continue to operate. Child and youth care centres will remain open. Additional shelters for women and children in crisis will be made available. A toll-free number has been established and the public are encouraged to report incidents of domestic violence and child abuse. In terms of existing legislation and regulations it is a civic duty to do so.

The lockdown has meant that children will be home for an extended period of time, and they can easily become bored; outings or having friends over to play are not possibilities. At the same time many parents will be attempting to work at home. The balance of home life is disruptive and occupying children is a challenge. The Department of Basic Education has made resource materials and lessons available online and has urged parents to home-school where possible. Such material is only available to those parents who have the appropriate electronic devices. This means that a large number of children, particularly in informal settlements, will not have access to these educational opportunities/alternatives. There have been questions regarding the shared custody of children. During the period of the lockdown a child will remain in the care of the parent with whom they were staying at the onset of the lockdown.

The lockdown does provide the opportunity to spend more time interacting with one's children, which our busy lifestyles do not often provide.

Some routine for the day should be established and alternative forms of discipline explored.

Common household items can be used for play and waste materials used for craft. Housework can be turned into a fun activity. Hand washing and hygiene are critically important – apparently singing 'happy birthday' takes about 20 seconds! Children will have many questions regarding the virus and may be fearful that they or their caregivers may contract it; many will have difficulty understanding the need for confinement. It is important to be honest with children, while at the same time it is important to reassure them that everything possible is being done to stop the spread of the virus and that they can help by being co-operative at home and by maintaining good hygiene. Discussions regarding the severity of the infection rate should not take place in front of children.

Given the high prevalence of child kidnappings and murders it is essential to be vigilant in the supervision of children. Overcrowded living conditions make it relatively easy for children to disappear.

Over nine million children depend on school feeding schemes for a nutritious meal once a day. Social distancing renders this impossible. Community feeding schemes and the delivery of food parcels will be increased. There is a need to strengthen the capacity of communities, and volunteers are needed to assist in these duties. They will be provided with the necessary protective gear. A South Africa Covid-19 Solidarity Fund has been established to assist.

It is important to be mindful that both the 1918/19 Spanish Flu and the HIV/AIDS pandemic resulted in large scale orphanhood, with devastating consequences for children. This needs to be prevented from happening again in every way possible. Parents need to understand that the most effective ways of looking after their children are to take care of themselves, to maintain social distancing, and to keep their children at home for this period.

5. Older Persons and those with Disabilities

Social services to older persons and those with disabilities will not be interrupted during the lockdown and those who care for them are regarded as an essential service. The provisions

made for public transport are intended to accommodate the travel needs of carers and nursing staff. It will be particularly difficult for such workers though, as they have the responsibility for their own families and many have children at home. They will have to be especially vigilant in terms of sanitising and must be provided with protective clothing.

6. The Homeless

Most of our cities have a significant number of homeless people and measures are being put in place to provide shelter, food and medical care. Existing shelters and feeding schemes are to remain open and operative while adopting physical distancing measures. Municipal officials are going to areas with high levels of homelessness to persuade those living on the streets to willingly move into school boarding houses and other facilities during the period of the lockdown. Concerns have been expressed that there is a high incidence of substance abuse among those who live on the street, and many may be reluctant to enter any kind of residential care. However, their continued presence on the street would be in contravention of the lockdown, so officials are obliged to act.

Similarly, groups of refugees who find themselves homeless during this period of lockdown have to be accommodated. They are obliged to maintain physical distancing and can no longer occupy spaces such as a church, as this would also be in contravention of the regulations pertaining to the lockdown.

It has been suggested that the homeless can be accommodated in boarding schools where there would be beds which would assist with physical distancing. This approach is very pragmatic but requires the cooperation of the Department of Basic Education. Community halls which are usually made available to those in crisis do not permit sufficient social distancing.

7. HIV/AIDS and Multi-Drug Resistant TB

South Africa bears a high burden of people who have compromised immune systems and they need to be protected from Covid-19. Unfortunately, not all of them are on the appropriate treatment and if infected they render others vulnerable as well. Many live in informal

settlements in unsanitary and overcrowded conditions. Provision has been made for those who are receiving medication to be given a three month supply of chronic medication to limit contact with hospitals and clinics.

8. Prisoners

It is well known that South Africa has a high prison population who live in very overcrowded conditions. Visits to prisons by those outside of the prison service have been limited since the declaration of the State of Disaster, and all visits have been suspended for the duration of the lockdown. However, very little information has been made available regarding the potential threat that Covid-19 poses to the general prison population, where it is impossible to maintain social distancing. There does not seem to be any directive from the Department of Correctional Services regarding their strategy for limiting the spread of the virus in prisons. This has prompted the Detention Justice Forum to write to the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons (JICS), expressing concern that

“it is our overall impression that amongst prisoners there is a great sense of uncertainty and that rumours are flying thick and fast. We have seen very little communication from DCS senior management and the ministry on prisoners and COVID-19. We are deeply concerned that under a lock-down situation (similar to the DCS annual Operation Vala) the risk for unrest and violence may increase if there is a lack of accurate information conveyed to prisoners and staff. It was indeed this uncertainty and lack of clarity, as was found by the *Kriegler Commission*, which resulted in the 1994 prison unrests resulting in the deaths of 36 prisoners.”³

The United Nations has issued guidance as to how people deprived of their liberty ought to be treated.⁴

9. Housing and Sanitation

“According to epidemiologists, the coronavirus pandemic was inevitable. Informal settlements were not. By failing to address the latter, the government has potentially massively compounded the former”.⁵ Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation Minister, Lindiwe Sisulu, this

week said the government would begin trying to 'de-densify' or 'de-concentrate' densely populated informal settlements to prevent the spread of Covid-19.⁶ Land will be made available to accommodate households. The National Command Centre has as yet to spell out how such a difficult operation will be conducted, but its successful implementation will require considerable buy-in from communities. Those being relocated will require building materials at the very least. The Department has made a significant number of water tankers available to those who do not have access to piped water. Similarly, toilet facilities will be made available. Once we emerge from the lockdown, we will know that we can provide better service delivery, that we can provide proper water and toilet facilities, and that we can arrange for the de-densification of informal settlements.

10. Mental Health

Blanket news viewing should be discouraged for the mental health of all. However, watching daily

press briefings does keep one up to date with developing news and any new regulations that have been introduced. It is important to stay positive but informed, and to avoid spreading rumours, fake news and uninformed speculation. Anyone with internet access can easily check the accuracy and veracity of any information that is shared on social media. Those who suffer from mental health conditions are particularly vulnerable, and those in residential care will remain there for the duration of the lockdown.

11. Conclusion

Hopefully, some of the good behaviours learnt during this crisis will, if sustained, result in more law abiding and socially responsible and conscious behaviour among South Africans, behaviour that could reclaim the real spirit of Ubuntu – paraphrased as 'how I am affects how you are'. During the State of Emergency in 1985 the Kairos theologians reminded us that a crisis is also a time of 'grace and opportunity';⁷ let us use this one well!

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¹ It should be noted that sign language interpreters have been used to interpret the President's speeches and ministers' media briefings.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>

³ diforum@googlegroups.com 27th March 2020

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/OPCAT/AdviceStatePartiesCoronavirusPandemic2020.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-03-27-de-densifying-and-decanting->

⁶ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-03-27-battleground-gauteng-epicentre>

⁷ The Kairos Document, 1985

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