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OPEN SDG CLUB COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

The community-lived experience of the impact
of Covid-19 and their views on better recovery

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and members of South African working Group on SDGs

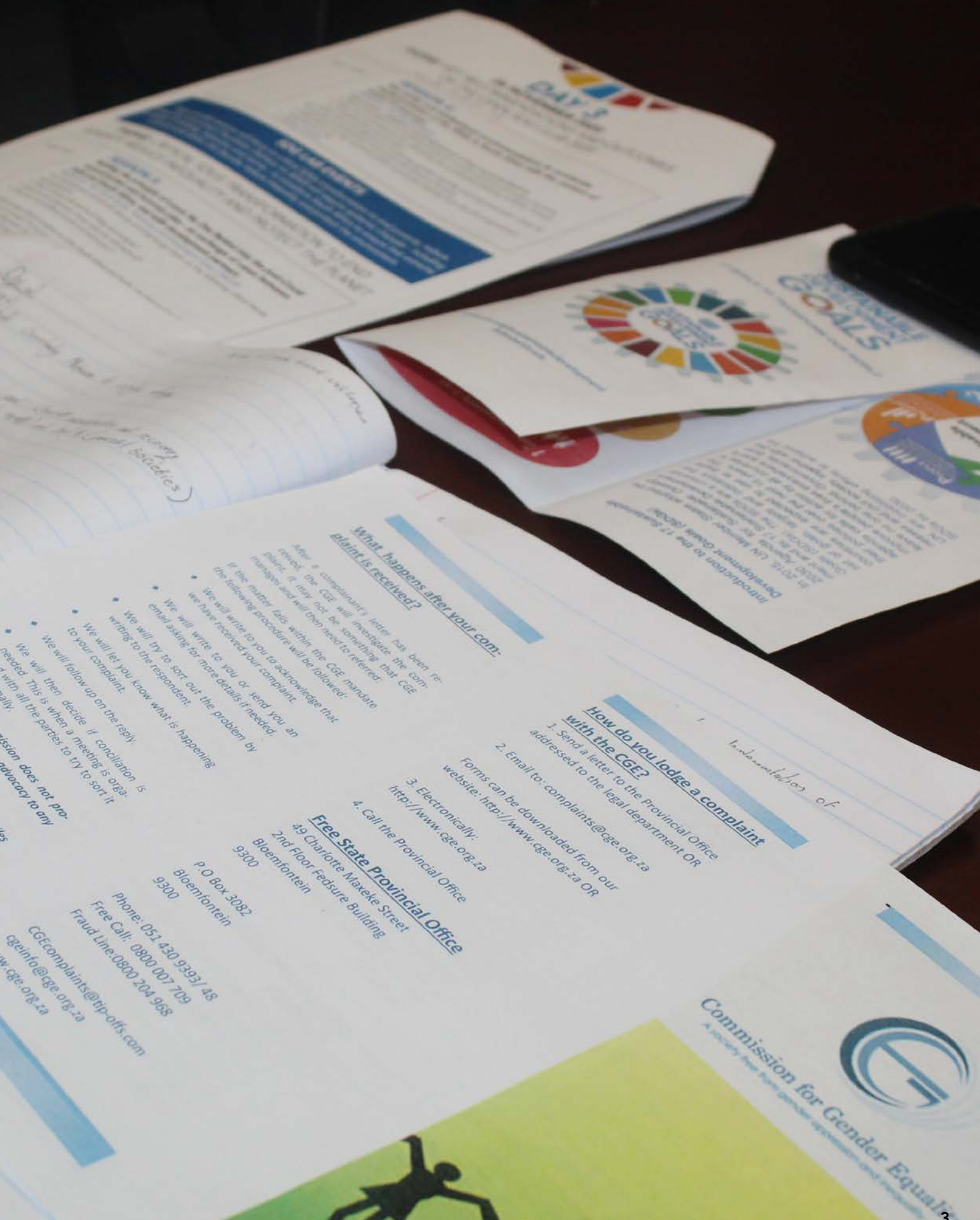


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Acronyms

ANC	African National Congress
CAN	Community Action Networks
DSTV	Digital Satellite Television
FDGS	Focus Group Discussions
GBV	Gender-based violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
NIDS-CRAM	National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey
PMBEJD	Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SASSA	South African Social Security Agency
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SMMEs	Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises
STATS-	SA Statistics South Africa
TERS	Temporary Employer-Employee Relief Scheme
UIF	Unemployment Insurance Fund
UNDESA	The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
Wi-Fi	wireless fidelity





1. Introduction and background

This Open SDG Club South Africa community dialogue report is based on community consultations in three provinces in South Africa in October and November 2020. These consultations were premised on gaining a better understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on grassroots communities, how these communities experienced the national Covid-19 emergency response, as well as their views on the post-Covid-19 recovery. The process aimed to bring to the fore the unfiltered voices of people at the grassroots level from different communities in South Africa. Accounts of how participants were impacted by the global health pandemic, the implications of the state's responses, as well as participants' views on the economic recovery plan, were heard throughout the country.

The impact of Covid-19 has been enormous in South Africa, as years of austerity measures and chronic corruption have left the state healthcare system in dire straits¹. In addition, millions live in abject poverty with little to no access to water and sanitation facilities; living in crowded human settlements; the population is immune-compromised; millions are dependent on the informal sector, employed as casuals or precarious employment; and people are not able to practice social distancing or obtain factual information related to Covid-19.

The Covid-19 pandemic is the largest social and economic shock of our lifetime, says Spaul, adding that: "The rapid spread of the virus around the world and the economic devastation it has left in its wake is unlike anything we've seen in our lifetimes"².

During the months of February to April 2020, the economy shed three million jobs as a direct consequence of Covid-19, according to early NIDS-CRAM data analysis. The month of April was particularly hard for South Africa. Under lockdown level 5, income and employment were severely affected. This affected individuals' financial and food security. It stands well to note that South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world. The International Labour Organization (ILO) notes: "Unemployment, given its intersection with inequality and poverty, is the biggest challenge South Africa faces for achieving decent work and social justice"³.

African Monitor, in partnership with community organisations, conducted community dialogues in the City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality in the Western Cape, Joe Morolong Local Municipality in the Northern Cape and the City of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality in Gauteng, to understand the impact of Covid-19 on communities, their experiences of the national Covid-19 emergency response, and their understanding of the National Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan.

This report is designed to amplify the voices of citizens on the impact that Covid-19 has had on grassroots communities, their coping mechanisms and their experience with the national Covid-19 emergency response.

The national Covid-19 emergency response

The South African government declared a national state of disaster on 15 March 2020, and the nationwide lockdown was effective initially for 21 days from 26 March 2020. Lockdown regulations included social-distancing measures, a strict curfew, closure of all non-essential business and the suspension of all social activities. These measures induced substantial welfare losses, exacerbating already high levels of unemployment and inequality, while pushing hundreds of thousands back into poverty.

In late April 2020, the 'Extraordinary coronavirus budget'⁴ was announced, adding up to R500-billion injected into the economy equivalent to 10% of the country's GDP. Designed to mitigate the impact of social-distancing measures, it also sought to prioritise the poor and most vulnerable, who were: "Catered for in a range of measures that include an increase in the social grant and billions of rands in subsidies for business and wages"⁵.

The economic package included tax relief, wage support, funding for small businesses and a disaster relief fund. Cumulatively, these measures were critical, as businesses had closed and many people had lost their jobs.

The measures included:

- A budget allocation of R20-billion to municipalities for emergency water supplies, public transport and shelter for homeless people.

1 Sibeko, B. (2019). The cost of austerity: Lessons for South Africa. Institute for Economic Justice Working Paper Series, No 2.

2 Spaul et al. (2020). NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Findings.

3 ILO. (2019). Inclusive Future of Work: South Africa. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/how-the-ilo-works/multilateral-system/brics/2019/WCMS_732871/lang--en/index.htm Last accessed: 20 December 2020.

4 Ramaphosa announces R500-billion Covid-19 package for South Africa. Tromp & Kings. 21 April 2020. Daily Maverick. <https://mg.co.za/article/2020-04-21-ramaphosa-announces-r500-billion-covid-19-package-for-south-africa/>

5 Ibid.



- Another R20-billion was allocated for the relief of hunger and social distress.
- The South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) implemented technology-based solutions to roll out food assistance through food vouchers to ensure that this assistance reached people faster.
- A R500 top-up to current grant recipients as well as the introduction of a special R350 Covid-19 grant to those receiving no other form of government support.
- The Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) Covid-19 Temporary Employer-Employee Relief Scheme (TERS) was instituted for workers whose salaries were affected by the national state of disaster and lockdown period.

All in all, these measures were exemplary and on par with the efforts of many developed economies to mitigate the economic and social devastation brought on by Covid-19.

1.1 Rationale

Currently, the data related to the impact of Covid-19, including from government departments such as Labour and Health, are lacking, scarce, incomplete and not representative. The NIDS-CRAM⁶ is the only large-scale impact study tracking approximately 7 000 households⁷ to assess the direct impacts of Covid-19 on their lives and livelihoods. Available data are also not representative of grassroots accounts of coping mechanisms and perspectives on recovery plans. Therefore, this report endeavours to consider the current work emerging, while also adding valuable citizen-gathered data from a wide range of persons from different contexts in order to present a diverse and representative study of the population.

1.2 Study objectives and methodology

The primary objective of the community dialogues was to generate data on communities' experiences of the impact of Covid-19, their lived experience of the Covid-19 emergency response, their knowledge of the recovery plan, as well as aspirations at the grassroots level to 'build back better'.

The research objectives were to:

- Assess the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of South Africans.
- Document communities' experiences of the Covid-19 emergency response.
- Generate communities' views on inclusive and transformative recovery.

6 <https://cramsurvey.org/about/>

7 Spaul et al. NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 Synthesis Report: Overview and findings.

8 Sachs, J., Schmidt-Traub, G., Kroll, C., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., Woelm, F. (2020). The Sustainable Development Goals and Covid-19. Sustainable Development Report 2020. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

9 UNDESA. (2020). Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of Covid-19.

1.3 Research methods

This study uses the adapted version of the Citizens' Hearings methodology developed by African Monitor. This tailored approach allowed for the telling of the 'stories of the human face of the Covid-19 pandemic' through outcomes of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and testimonies. It also allowed for the generation of testimonies and case stories regarding Covid-19 impacts, emergency response and recovery interventions.

The choice of municipalities was based on structured (purposive) sampling. The three provinces represented have key characteristics that allow for themes to be viewed as being reasonably representative of South Africa in terms of demographic, economic, geographic and political factors. The three municipalities selected were the City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality in the Western Cape, Joe Morolong Local Municipality in the Northern Cape and the City of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality in Gauteng.

These locations were visited to conduct FGDs to elicit ideas, stories, concepts and testimonies on Covid-19 impacts, emergency response and recovery efforts. The scope of this research is to provide a snapshot of what is happening in these localities without claiming to be nationally representative. Care was taken to ensure a representative mix of persons, as this provides a broader spectrum of lived experiences, opinion and feedback, adding to the validity of the citizen-gathered data.

The guiding questions of the FGDs were formulated based on the objectives of this research.

1.4 Theoretical framework

There are several channels through which the pandemic directly affects the well-being of individuals and households: through the health impacts of the virus itself, through crisis response measures such as travel restrictions and business closures, and the aggregated effects of both of these (Sachs et al⁸, 2020; UNDESA, 2020⁹).

Notably, the severity of impacts through these channels has been influenced by pre-pandemic factors, many of which are at the heart of the SDGs. For example, access to clean water (SDG 6) is a prerequisite for being able to wash hands frequently; living in substandard, unsanitary and overcrowded conditions such as slums (SDG 11) increases the risk of exposure to the virus; and pre-existing health conditions such as non-communicable diseases (SDG 3) tend to worsen disease outcomes. The same is true for the impacts of crisis response measures. Past progress in promoting formal employment (SDG 8); increasing access to quality health care (SDG 3); being covered by social protection



(SDG 1); ICT availability (SDG 9) that facilitates participation in a virtual classroom, to name a few, help mitigate the severity of adverse impacts.

At the aggregate level, too, there are distinct benefits from past progress on the SDGs: for example, more diversified economies (SDG 8) may experience less precipitous declines in GDP than those dependent primarily on tourism or petroleum production. This pandemic shows, once again, that the SDGs are interlinked: progress on one goal (or lack thereof) affects other goals. Moreover, the degree of progress on multiple goals and targets is itself likely to contribute to the eventual impacts of the crisis on the SDGs.

1.5 Research questions

The study attempted to assess the impact channels of Covid-19 on the study group:

1. How has Covid-19 impacted you and your community, both in terms of public health issues as well as the effect of lockdown on livelihoods? What has been the short-term and long-term impact?
2. What systemic vulnerabilities reinforced the impact of Covid-19?
3. What were the coping mechanisms that your

community used, or how does your community cope with the impact of Covid-19?

4. What is your assessment of the government's Covid-19 response in terms of identifying and targeting beneficiary groups, access to and availability of services, the effectiveness of programmes and services, as well as the outcomes of programmes and services?
5. What is your community doing to rebuild lives? What does your community expect from government and business?
6. What does your community need to rebuild lives and resilient livelihoods? What is your priority?
7. How can your community be empowered and strengthen its voice and agency?

1.6 Fieldwork

Community dialogues were conducted in Tafelsig locality, City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality; Kuruman locality, Joe Morolong Local Municipality; and Katlehong locality, City of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality. From the three municipalities, 89 community members partook at the three citizen hearings.

COMMUNITY PROFILES

Tafelsig, Western Cape

The Tafelsig community (sub-place) is located in Mitchells Plain (main place) with a population of 61 757 (according to Census 2011). The community engaged was largely unemployed or already pensioners before Covid-19. The community is plagued by high rates of unemployment, poverty and gangsterism. Many receive various forms of SASSA grants such as the childcare, foster care and disability grants. Those who worked before the pandemic were predominantly employed in the formal sector. These included tradesmen, salesmen and elderly care workers. A few women noted that they worked as domestics on an irregular basis for families in the city.

Kuruman, Northern Cape

The Northern Cape's main economic activities are mining and agriculture. The municipality is home to a population of 84 200 residents and 23 922 households. The Joe Morolong Local Municipality is described as a poor rural town by inhabitants and the community has a low average annual income of R14 600, which is about half the amount in the Northern Cape, at R29 400. The Joe Morolong mining area has been a main source of economic activity. East Manganese, located in the Joe Morolong district, has been granted a mining right, water-use licence and the latest regulatory approvals. This could aid economic activity in the area and create between 70 and 80 direct new jobs on the mining complex once peak production has been reached. However, currently inhabitants remain underprivileged, with little to no access to key resources such as water and electricity.

Katlehong, Gauteng

Katlehong is a large township in Gauteng and falls under the administration of the City of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality. It is situated 28 kilometres southeast of Johannesburg and south of Germiston between the townships of Thokoza and Vosloorus in the East Rand. According to the 2016 STATS SA Community Survey, the population of the township is 3 379 104. The township is diverse and the languages spoken are predominantly isiZulu, Sesotho and Setswana, but there are other ethnic groups and populations from neighbouring countries. Most of the inhabitants of this community operate in the informal economy due to lack of educational attainment and residency status. The inhabitants have little to no access to key resources such as electricity and water, as many also live in informal settlements.





These one-day sessions were held as follows:

LOCATION	DATE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Tafelsig, Western Cape	28 October 2020	27
Kuruman, Northern Cape	29 October 2020	24
Katlehong, Gauteng	6 November 2020	38

The community citizen hearings were coordinated at the grassroots level by local community leaders and activists.

In Tafelsig, participants, both male and female, ranged in age from 17 to 87. While the participants were exclusively coloured, this reflects the historic nature of the geographic location. The ward councillor was notified and invited to the meeting but he did not attend. A separate telephonic interview was conducted with him at a later date.

In Kuruman, participants from rural areas within the Joe Morolong Local Municipality met as it is central and had the necessary amenities. The participants, both male and female, ranged in age from 20 to 75. The group included business people from small to medium-sized businesses in the area, as well as teachers and community workers.

In Katlehong, the participants, predominantly black, ranged from school-going age (15 to 16) to 60 and

included some people with disabilities. The group members largely made their living from the informal sector and many households were grants recipients.

The citizen hearings were designed in two distinct parts. The first half of each meeting was held as a group discussion led by the facilitator. The guideline questions were developed to locate us within an understanding of the characteristics of the community and their experiences of Covid-19. The second part of each meeting comprised FGDs in which participants had the opportunity to collectively ponder deeply on the questions at hand. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with key informants such as ward councillors, community leaders and voices missing from the first encounter.

Communities were probed about their knowledge of, and opinion on, the recovery plan. Sources of information sharing and consumption were also explored in relation to Covid-19 information, such as protective behaviour and the accessing of relief packages.







2. Emerging findings: Impact of Covid-19, systemic vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms

The following section provides an overview of the data gathered during the community citizen hearings. This section covers the economic and social impact of Covid-19 on communities, systemic vulnerabilities, coping mechanisms and community perspectives on better recovery.

The impact analysis sought to encapsulate the various impact channels through which Covid-19 altered the lives and livelihoods of communities. The economic impact results from loss of income and livelihoods and the increased cost of living, while the social impact manifests in food insecurity, GBV, lack of safety in communities, and psychological and mental health issues due to the closure of schools and social services facilities, as well as inadequate housing facilities.

2.1 Loss of income and livelihoods

The largest impact experienced at the grassroots level was the loss of jobs and income. According to early analysis based on the NIDS-CRAM data, three million jobs were shed between February and April 2020¹⁰, deepening the already existing unemployment crisis. We have to be cautious when analysing these job losses as many were framed as furloughed workers or temporary layoffs due to the lockdown restrictions placed on businesses. The loss of jobs and income brought onto families and households is a direct impact of the level 5 implementation of the closure of all non-essential businesses as well as the restriction of movement of persons. In Tafelsig, many were employed in the formal economy, where their jobs were not categorised as essential and they, therefore, suffered job losses.

"I had two jobs before Covid-19. I was doing upholstery for Spur across the Western Cape. Now I don't have a job." – Tafelsig

"I lost my job as a security guard during the lockdown as my company was not operating. The company promised us remuneration packages... we are still waiting." – Katlehong

The state had indicated that SMMEs could access funds via the workers' compensation fund. However as one Tafelsig respondent explains, they were never able to access this through the UIF: "To date, I have not been able to access my retirement package administered through the UIF. I went from being the breadwinner to not being able to provide for my family. It's been a hard change to my role as the man in the house."

In the Gauteng community dialogue, where the majority were employed in the informal sector, losses were also felt, with little to no access to formal channels of small business relief. The informal sector

is largely occupied by women in the community, who suffered great economic losses. Small business owners who applied for relief schemes report that they are still awaiting feedback. Unsurprisingly, NIDS-CRAM researchers found that: "Job losses were disproportionately concentrated among the already disadvantaged groups in the labour market".

In the Northern Cape, those with livestock and farming spoke of the hardships they endured due to the restriction of movement. They could not visit their smallholdings regularly and this caused economic losses, which impacted their immediate survival as well as the future survival of their businesses.

"Local farmers in the villages were unable to go and look after their livestock due to lockdown." – Kuruman

The increase in food prices and having to provide more meals per day for a higher number of persons per household also weighed heavily on already stretched budgets.

"I had to make debt. I could not survive off the SASSA payments, it's not enough." – Tafelsig

The closure of non-essential workplaces and schools placed an enormous economic strain on household budgets. In the Northern Cape, where the extractive industry is an economic pillar, residents felt that multi-national corporations had a moral imperative to provide better relief, as the communities where they extract super-profits were suffering. At a macro-level, the increased strain on relief agencies such as SASSA led to increased backlogs and failure of pay-outs, as told by residents across the country. Participants argued that while it may take them a while to recover from the negative financial impacts, the high unemployment rate, lack of access to educational opportunities and difficulty in accessing formal business or relief assistance prohibits them from improving their livelihoods. These conditions also further deteriorated their relationship with the state, with many feeling excluded from political processes and economic beneficiation.

2.2 Food price hikes and increased food insecurity

The economic losses brought on by Covid-19 have been exacerbated by food price hikes. Food insecurity directly linked to a loss of income caused much strain on the participants' households. Parents reported the strain school closures placed on their food security, as many received state assistance through feeding schemes at schools. One participant in Katlehong said:





“It is usually better when children are at school because they receive lunch at school.”

Many reported an inability to make ends meet, with more mouths to feed on less to no income. Food price hikes were reported nationally despite the directive from the president regulating food price hikes. Supermarkets such as Shoprite and Pick n Pay maintain that they did not increase their prices drastically; they only did so because of the end of promotions and supplier-driven increases. However, according to the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group (PMBEJD)¹¹, the cost of the weighted household food basket increased sharply between March and April and continued its upward trend. The highest food price spikes happened between March and April, with a 5,8% increase noted.

Our findings support that the price increases occurred on the ‘unregulated market’. For example, in the Northern Cape, it was reported that small spaza shops increased their prices exorbitantly. This caused much dissatisfaction in the community, where there is little access to public transport in order to access larger supermarkets, thus making residents reliant on the spaza shops.

A participant in Kuruman alluded to increased food prices and the inaccessibility of supermarkets due to travel and movement restrictions, forcing residents to purchase goods at grossly inflated prices. “The relief grant is not enough, the shops based in the communities are expensive and selling staples like pap at inflated prices.”

11 Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity. (2020). Covid-19: Food prices continue to spike: women are getting increasingly concerned.





In our community citizen hearings, we found that both grant-receiving households, as well as households with no grants, experienced increased economic strain. Jain et al. report that: “Approximately 30% of those who were retrenched between February and April report no household-level grant protection at all¹²”.

2.3 Digital Divide – Education and work

Communities with limited access to infrastructural services such as ICT infrastructure, housing and community facilities, water and sanitation, and transport, have been adversely impacted by Covid-19. This manifested itself in the deepening of the digital divide, whereby the lack of access to digital platforms and technology perpetuates the cycle of exclusion and poverty. Communities were impacted as follows:

School closures: These impacted families significantly, especially lower-income families with no or little access to the internet, data, DStv and electricity. A participant from Kuruman stated: “Government promised programmes but didn’t deliver.” Due to the DStv subscription fees, many learners were excluded and

parents were angered, saying it was unfair and not well thought out.

According to a participant from Katlehong: “When they tried having classes on the television, they were still on DStv, which is a luxury for most people... These should’ve been done on SABC as well as the radio¹³”.

Employees: Jobs have been impacted in various ways by Covid-19. Ways of working have been formalised mostly in work-from-home arrangements for companies that can continue to operate remotely, using popularised online meeting platforms such as Zoom. For this arrangement to be successful, workers need a laptop, Wi-Fi or some form of internet connectivity, electricity, as well as a space to work within the home. It is also worthwhile to note that tertiary education students were required to adopt the same working methodology. These technological prerequisites were not always available and had significant costs borne by employees. Access to electricity proved problematic, especially in Katlehong, where power-cuts have been experienced for an extended period.

12 Jain, R., Budlender, J., Zizzamia, R., & Bassier, I. (2020). The labour market and poverty impacts of Covid-19 in South Africa.

13 Digital Satellite Television (DStv) is a direct broadcast paid satellite service in Sub-Saharan Africa. Currently, around 18.8 million people subscribe by paying a monthly fee ranging from R350-R1 200 for paid content. This contrasts with the free (apart from the annual licence fee) South African Broadcasting Corporation offering of 19 radio stations and five television broadcasts to the general public. Woza Matrics was aimed at assisting matrics during lockdown. However, the choice to broadcast it largely via a paid-subscription channel indicates yet another policy implementation misalignment.



Elderly and unemployed: Due to social-distancing measures, many of the relief fund measures were digitised. The elderly and unemployed required smart phones and at times data to access Covid-19 relief grants applications. This was further compounded by low literacy rates within the poorest communities.

"The UIF process is not friendly, especially to those with no access to smartphones." – Katlehong

"I had to assist community members to understand and complete applications because they couldn't understand them." – Tafelsig

2.4 Food security, gender-based violence and mental health impacts

The closure of schools, workplaces and community facilities during the lockdown reduced access to school meals, social welfare services and community safety services. This, coupled with inadequate and crowded housing, resulted in a familial breakdown, increased incidences of gender-based violence, and exposure to gangsterism and illegal activities.

The strain of the health pandemic, together with uncertainty and economic vulnerability, resulted in stressful home environments for the majority of the participants. The negative impacts of the virus and the state-mandated precautionary measures were disproportionately felt by the focus group due to their economic and social circumstances.

Many reported that they feared the virus, they knew of persons dying due to infection, they were frustrated, and in many instances could not adequately process losses close to them due to the lockdown restrictions. One Tafelsig participant said: "I won't lie, I was afraid. I was afraid I was going to die."

They also noted that their lack of freedom impacted their state of mind negatively and, more so, their

inability to provide for their families and extended communities. Parents also spoke of the increased stress their children endured due to school closures and lack of access to data and electricity, resulting in them falling behind with schoolwork. Depression and a sense of loneliness from prolonged periods of isolation can have further mental and physical health repercussions. We also found that the housing situation of the study population was largely inadequate. The respondents reported that their houses were too small for self-isolation and the health facilities closest to them were inadequate.

"Psychological and mental health issues like stress and depression were caused by Covid-19 due to social isolation." – Kuruman

"The stress became too much, I turned to drugs." – Tafelsig

"It was hard emotionally; I didn't know how to cope." – Katlehong

"The lack of access to alcohol made it hard for me to cope; I got depressed because alcohol is a comfort to me." – Katlehong

One Tafelsig mother with foster children reported the lack of access to welfare services during this time. Due to the restrictions and social distancing, health and social care workers were pulled from communities, with devastating impacts on households. Furthermore, state facilities for social interactions were also closed, further isolating many who relied on them as a part of their daily lives.

The Tafelsig foster mother reported: "We haven't seen a social worker since this started; the issues that come up for the kids have been left behind."

A participant from Kuruman reported: "We need more centres for interactions and places to gather."





3. Systemic vulnerabilities

The impacts of Covid-19 on communities were reinforced by existing historic and systemic vulnerabilities. It was revealed that, across the country, participants were economically vulnerable due to the nature of their jobs or sources of livelihoods, with many operating in the informal sector and therefore not always qualifying for assistance. Poor access to essential basic services such as water, electricity, ICT, housing and safety placed them in an even more exposed and vulnerable position.

Vulnerable livelihoods and precarious jobs

Systemic vulnerabilities were observed among people who engaged in the informal sector and those employed as casuals. Those with precarious jobs were mainly vulnerable to the impacts of Covid-19. As Jain et al. note: "Women, manual workers, and those at the bottom half of the income distribution have suffered disproportionately higher rates of job losses"¹⁴. Informal business owners exist in even more precarious economic conditions as they do not receive assistance beyond relief packages lacking the required legal documents such as registration and taxation certificates. This was a double burden for unregistered foreign small informal business owners.

These workers were largely excluded as beneficiaries of the relief packages and lockdown restricted their ability to trade for up to three months. Furthermore, due to the increasingly precarious nature of work in the formal economy, millions of workers have effectively been job-insecure since the advent of Covid-19 due to decreased work hours and no-work-no-pay conditions. Many were also negatively impacted by the digital divide as they could not work from home due to the nature of their jobs, low connectivity in their areas and high data costs. A larger share of the informal economy (relative to formal employment) was locked out of employment during the month of April, according to Rogan and Skinner¹⁵.

These findings were reflected in the feedback provided by participants. We also acknowledge that vulnerabilities are context-specific and therefore vary across the communities and individual experiences encountered in this study. However, some systemic vulnerabilities can be experienced due to race, gender, income and geographic location. Vulnerabilities are also intersectional. These are the points where vulnerabilities such as gender, health, economic and social status

and sexual orientation collide. The following section reflects the systemic vulnerabilities, especially economic and access to services vulnerabilities, which greatly exacerbated the lived experiences of Covid-19 for the communities with which we worked in this study.

Access to basic services

Lack of access to basic services and infrastructure is one factor that increased the vulnerability of communities during the pandemic. A study by The Presidency revealed in 2015 that approximately 80% of municipalities had failed to perform their mandatory duties, including the delivery of basic services¹⁶. During Covid-19, these realities manifested themselves on the bodies and in the lived experiences of the poor and marginalised across the country. The following detailed accounts were shared.

One middle-aged male participant in Kuruman reported: "Communities here don't have access to many resources. People from Kuruman have to travel to Kimberley; some communities have no clinics, shops or security."

Participants from Katlehong said they did not have access to services such as electricity, housing and community safety. Poor access to adequate sanitation posed a further health risk. Inhabitants could not wash their hands frequently as prescribed and did not always have money for sanitisers.

The informal settlement at Tafelsig was the hardest hit as they had no access to running water. According to one respondent: "It was especially hard. We knew little about the virus. We knew we had to wash our hands, but we do not have running water in the informal settlement. I wrote to the councillor and others for help. I put up a water station in front of my place so that people could wash their hands."

In Kuruman, an elderly community development worker spoke of how the local district hospital, 10 kilometres from her home, had not had running water since 2011. "Since 2011, there has been no water at the district hospital. During Covid-19 I had to walk with a flask of water daily to take to my husband in hospital."

Other participants in the Kuruman hearing reflected on how they had to walk the 10 kilometres in both directions daily to take water to their partners and family members who were in the hospital.

14 Jain, R., Budlender, J., Zizzamia, R., & Bassier, I. (2020). The labour market and poverty impacts of Covid-19 in South Africa.

15 Rogan, M. & Skinner, C. (2020). The Covid-19 crisis and the South African informal economy: 'Locked out' of livelihoods and employment.

16 Human Sciences Research Council. The social costs of violent and destructive service-delivery protests in South Africa. Available at: <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/review/hsrc-review-dec-2018/service-delivery-protests> last accessed 10 December 2020.





The Katlehong community reported on the challenges they faced around the availability of electricity and water. One participant said: "Inconsistency of electricity has always been a challenge in this community, but it got worse during Covid-19 because we spent close to three months without electricity."

A small business owner in the informal economy in the Katlehong meeting added that: "Even when lockdown allowed, I could not resume selling food due to no electricity, so the economic hardship continued."





4. Assessment of the emergency response

The budget failed to deliver on its Covid-19 relief promises, says the Budget Justice Coalition. It was found that only R36 billion in new money was allocated in the fiscus in this financial year, and social sectors such as basic education had even less money to spend than was originally allocated to them in February.

This failure was echoed across the country. Participants expressed frustration about the national Covid-19 emergency response. Their shared experience was one of exclusion, as the measures had very low penetration rates at a grassroots level. According to the Department of Statistics, 49,2% of the population over the age of 18 falls below the upper-bound poverty line¹⁷. This implies that there will be citizens who fall between the cracks of the relief budget. The measures put forward to protect the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society fell short of expectations. According to participants' responses, it is this very group that was denied access to relief measures. Difficulties in accessing food parcels and grants highlighted the ongoing deep-rooted failures of government at a grassroots level.

Respondents reported that very few had received food parcels, adding that distribution was politically aligned and motivated. Those eligible to apply for the special Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress grant were met with confusion and disappointment. Out of the 35 participants who applied for the grant, 31.4% were successful. Participants found the online application to be a hurdle due to illiteracy and lack of access to data and smartphones. These factors contribute to a widening digital divide and the inability to access relief measures specifically aimed at communities like these.

Unsuccessful applicants reported being unemployed and not receiving any other form of the state grant. They were baffled at their application status, while successful applicants experienced other challenges such as not being able to access their money once disbursed due to poor financial infrastructure and planning by SASSA. Communities were left to fend for themselves in many ways. They developed new coping mechanisms and depended on existing ones. The following section looks at these in greater detail. Strategies such as self-organising and feeding schemes were key survival mechanisms during the height of the pandemic.

¹⁷ The upper-bound poverty line (UBPL) indicates an income of R1 183 (\$70.90) per month. On the other hand, the lower-bound and food poverty lines indicate incomes of R785 (\$47.04) and R547 (\$32.78) respectively.







5. Community coping strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic

Community coping strategies during the Covid-19 fallout included incurring debt, developing vegetable gardens, and people-to-people solidarity through Community Action Networks (CANs). The government took early action to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and these measures continued to have devastating impacts at a local level. In the process, many participants noted that they lost not only their faith in government but also their pride. The decreased ability to care for themselves and their family members placed a great strain on their mental wellbeing. However, the co-creation of feeding schemes and other collective coping mechanisms did restore some sense of communal living, a connection previously lost.

Debt, vegetable gardens and CANs

There were instances where households became increasingly indebted in order to mitigate the impact of job losses and household income. A Tafelsig participant said that joblessness and increased food prices meant that their household budget was insufficient and they had to incur debt in order to stay afloat: "I had to make debt from a money lender to make it from one month to the next."

As a coping strategy, communities started a fruit and vegetable garden initiatives in order to become more self-sufficient. In Kuruman, this was also necessitated by the inaccessibility of shops and a need to decrease their reliance on government interventions, which never materialised in their communities. A community development worker noted that some of the community vegetable gardens had been yielding much. She suggested that government should be engaged to provide information regarding best planting practices.

Another coping strategy was people-to-people solidarity in the form of CANs, self-organised community networks to "address the negative social impact of the pandemic". Recognising that the government's relief package was not sufficient, CANs served to close the gap by mobilising to provide communities with food and necessities.

The Mitchells Plain CAN was established in March 2020 as a direct result of hunger and food insecurity in the community caused by the impact of Covid-19. With 22 feeding stations, the CAN served up to 350 people per mealtime. Both individuals and private institutions donated the resources required for the Mitchells Plain

CAN to provide three meals to community members in need. On occasion, the Tafelsig CAN received dried food ingredients from the City of Cape Town's mayor's office.

Community activist Joanie Fredericks reported that each feeding station was tasked to cook for at least 300 community members at a time. She also mentioned that due to the continued growth of unemployment, this number was at times much higher: "if we're being honest, there were days with much more than 300. The levels of hunger skyrocketed during this time, but the community stood together. We received very little from the local and national government, but we made it with the help of small businesses and other donations."

The participants in the Tafelsig meeting responded that, to date, this feeding scheme had been their sole coping strategy from the time the lockdown had been announced. One participant told of how she had to go from feeding station to feeding station to ensure that she could provide a meal for her three children daily. She went on to say that she was not embarrassed or dehumanised by this. Although it may be frowned upon, she needed to do whatever it took to feed her children.

Across the country, feeding stations, soup kitchens and other forms of hunger-prevention mechanisms, both attached to the CANs and independent of them, have largely filled in where government relief efforts have failed. The vacuum left by the government has had a negative impact on communities' trust in a political process to provide for the needy in the hardest of times. In some instances, this vacuum has been filled and exploited by negative forces, for example, gang leaders¹⁸ stepping in to provide key community goods and services. These acts lend them legitimacy and lead to a further deterioration in the relationship between vulnerable and exposed communities and the state. The Steenberg community is one such example. Senior Mongrels gang member Leon "Poppie" Meyer¹⁹ fed his community during this time and he said that "the government made it easy for people such as himself to win over the community".

Through the CAN in Kuruman, home-based care workers took the initiative with door-to-door programs for checking up on those who were ill and taking them to hospital where necessary, borrowing cars within the community to do so as they did not have their

18 DW News. (2020). Cape Town gangs help feed poor devastated by lockdown. <https://www.dw.com/en/cape-town-gangs-help-feed-poor-devastated-by-lockdown/av-53724531> last accessed: 02 December 2020.

19 Hyman, A. (2020). Times Live. How organised crime is exploiting Covid-19. <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-04-18-how-organised-crime-is-exploiting-covid-19/> last accessed: 02 December 2020.



own transport. They found that men did not want to go to the clinics and suggested that government interventions should target men in rural villages to encourage them to take better care of their health.

Voids left by the state have been filled in numerous ways and the lingering impacts of these have both positive and negative societal impacts. Communities are actively decreasing their reliance on the government due to a gross failure to deliver on stated promises.





6. Perspectives on the post-Covid-19 recovery

The South African government's Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan aim to deal with immediate actions towards economic recovery amid Covid-19 and rebuild and grow the economy, ensuring sustainability, resilience and inclusion. This plan has eight priorities: Strengthening energy security; localisation through industrialisation; strengthening food security; infrastructure investment and delivery that meets the NDP goals; support for tourism; green economy interventions; public employment programmes; and macro-economic policy interventions.

The community perspective on recovery is aligned with the 'build back better' approach to post-disaster recovery that reduces vulnerability to future disasters.

In the community dialogues, participants identified three pillars for building back their lives:

Fostering self-reliance and building social capital

Communities have indicated that community participation in the recovery process is important. The three communities across South Africa noted the need for more representative and transparent leaders. A central dimension of 'building back better' is the need for a people-centred recovery that focuses on well-being, improves inclusiveness and reduces inequality. Across the three communities, there was a general feeling of decreased reliance on government and using agriculture as a means to become more food secure should such a situation arise again. Citizens are of the opinion that big businesses such as mining companies have the social responsibility to support and plough back into the communities where their businesses are located. One aspect of building self-reliance is building social capital, including cooperatives and stokvels (traditional micro-finance entities), along with increased community networking, trust and inter-dependence to improve communities and the lives of individuals.

They noted that to move forward and rebuild stronger:

- "An honest government is needed, one that gives feedback to communities whether positive or negative and not just during elections." – Kuruman
- "The Tafelsig community started to grow vegetable gardens directly after establishing their CAN as they realised they needed to have independent, sustainable sources of food." – Tafelsig
- "We should become more self-reliant, leverage on our skills." – Tafelsig
- "We should have more community resources, spaces for engaging, too." – Kuruman
- "We must do agriculture." – Kotlehong

Building community resilience

Resilient communities are those that can resist, absorb and accommodate external shocks while also holding leaders and authorities accountable to their mandates and promises. At the core of the conversation, communities across the country understood the key factors to building resilient communities. These included understanding their localised contexts and vulnerabilities, leveraging and building community assets, and strengthening housing opportunities.

Community empowerment implies community ownership and action that explicitly aims to achieve social and political change. It is a process of renegotiating power to gain more control. In the eyes of the communities consulted, this process is an act of taking back power. They also say that re-commitment to the principles detailed in South Africa's hard-earned democratic constitution is required. They are no longer of the opinion that the constitution protects and benefits them. Rather, big business and profits are valued and prioritised over people.

"We need to be consulted, and not only when it comes to election times." – Tafelsig

"We should have a 'small parliament' built locally to include communities." – Kuruman

"We need to be represented when decisions are being made, we need leaders to be our voice." – Tafelsig

The Tafelsig community expressed the need to have a voice representing their lived experiences in the political space, as they believe that elected officials are far removed from their constituents. These sentiments were shared in Kuruman, where participants explained that they are not considered in political agenda-setting, with the result that the solutions that are then presented to them are inadequate.

People-centred development

Recovery plans should be people-centred and participatory, involving communities. Most community members were not aware of the National Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan. The participatory process undertaken by the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) was a gross failure and there was insufficient consultation across the board. The feedback supplied here, reflecting the voices of those in dire need, casts doubt on the effectiveness of NEDLAC as a consultation body, as well as on the recovery plan.





The three communities indicated that they were not consulted in the process of creating the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery plan. As one Tafelsig community member noted: "Because they were not consulted, the solutions do not suit them." Another resident responded that the policies were not made with them in mind.

Participants demonstrated a strong reliance on community leaders and persons whom they considered to be 'informed' as credible sources of information. Their feedback illustrates a gross lack of consultation with communities across the country regarding the economic recovery plan. This could lead to a misalignment in policy reactions, resulting in wasted state resources. Civic engagement is a key cornerstone of any democracy and any process that fails to adequately engage broadly with citizens cannot be accepted as representative. Communities once again

feel let down. Their exclusion from political processes that have direct impacts on their lives and livelihoods remains unacceptable to them.

Community members, therefore, call strongly for increased engagement and suggest new forms of engagement where processes are brought to them – a local parliament was one suggestion put forth in Kuruman. The same community expressed concern about financing for engagement. Their community has huge infrastructural issues such as lack of water and health services, a situation that is replicated in Katlehong. To this, they add the need for greater oversight and engagement, with fiscal accountability processes at all levels of government. However, they note that endemic corruption and flourishing systems of nepotism evident in secrecy and cover-ups make it highly unlikely that this will materialise.





7. Conclusion

According to the findings of this report, the impacts of Covid-19 were felt disproportionately by already poor and excluded community members. The greatest impact was the loss of income and livelihoods. Those most impacted were already operating outside the formal economy with little access to social safety nets, savings and assets.

South Africa's budgetary intervention measures were on par with those of some developed countries, and among the best in the Global South. The increase in social grants, together with the introduction of the Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress grant and distribution of food parcels, were the primary protective interventions for those living in poverty who had their survival threatened by Covid-19. Alongside the temporary employment relief scheme, these measures were aimed at saving lives by ensuring that some sources of income were preserved. However, as reported here, these efforts were too little too late and excluded those who needed it most – employees in both the informal and formal sectors who were working under precarious and unstable conditions.

From the community dialogues throughout this process, it is clear that poor and marginalised communities were left behind, a finding reinforced by the NIDS-CRAM data and early analysis. These communities were left to fend for themselves, with historic circumstances stacked against them. The impacts of Covid-19 were particularly harsh on women operating in the informal economy as grant recipients. Women experienced an increased burden threefold, firstly in unpaid care work, secondly in decreased economic opportunity and job losses, and lastly in their increased vulnerability to domestic violence. The stressors of the situation cannot be discounted, and the ravaging impacts of Covid-19 have threatened to undo progress for women and girl children in South Africa.

In all instances, people with disabilities felt particularly left behind. In Katlehong and Kuruman, disabled participants stated that when food parcels were being handed out, their impairments meant that by the time they reached the distribution points, no parcels were left.

The citizen hearings presented communities with a platform to reimagine their future, post-covid-19. This future is one where consultation, transparency and accountability take centre-stage in the renegotiation of the social contract and the resultant new relationship between state and citizens. The ineffectiveness of state machinery to deliver effectively on promises was also highlighted throughout this process. The growing

digital divide stands to further deepen inequalities if left unaddressed. This speaks to the misalignment of policymaking and implementation in South Africa. At the best of times, the voice of the people is understood, and at the worst of times, it is merely heard.

Recommendations

The overwhelming response from the community citizen hearings is the demand for a recommitment to the promises, aspirations and goals underpinning the 1994 emancipation from apartheid and entry into a free, democratic society. Some 24 years later, despite a world-class constitution, making provision for free access to housing, water and education, there is a renewed groundswell for delivery of, and access to, basic services.

From this report, citizens are willing to meet the state halfway in their endeavours to build a better future for themselves and their communities. They are willing to start vegetable gardens and leverage local economic assets and natural resources to build up social capital. This is a result of the continued failure of the state to deliver on its mandate. A renegotiation of power and a new social contract is required. Underpinning this is the grassroots demand for more inclusive governance led by wider consultation processes. Moreover, communities like Kuruman are reimagining their relationship with big businesses as social actors who have a moral responsibility to plough back into communities beyond social infrastructure. They envision educational training programmes enabling locals to take up jobs within these companies, and this should be facilitated by the government.

The spirit of ubuntu has also been reignited, with communities, small businesses and individuals coming together in different formations to support and feed their communities and beyond.

Build resilient livelihoods.

- Build resilient livelihoods based on understanding their localised contexts and vulnerabilities, leveraging and building community assets, and strengthening housing opportunities
- Greater support for community-level food security initiatives, such as the CANs, is required. Support grants should also be extended to these crucial lifelines at a community level.
- Increased visibility, awareness of, and support for, food-secure communities is needed. Communities should be trained to grow their crops and should be supplied with key resources such as land and water to develop alternative livelihoods.



Social safety nets and food security

- There should be greater protection against loss of income and livelihoods by ensuring that relief measures are designed for, and guided by, the needs of the poor and marginalised.
- There should be gender-sensitive social security policy-making – women have to carry an increased burden with limited resources.
- A basic income grant should be made available to protect those who 'fall between the cracks'.
- At all levels, food price hikes should be prohibited. Spaza shops should be encouraged to refrain from extreme food price hikes as this endangers the livelihoods of communities with little to no access to supermarkets.
- In the instance of school closures, provision should be made to safely deliver or distribute meals to those learners on school feeding schemes.
- Legislation should make room for greater job security to reduce precarious jobs and no-work-no-pay arrangements.
- It must be ensured that big businesses are paying all required taxation and that their activities benefit local communities in terms of job creation, education opportunities and infrastructure development.

Access to basic services and data

- Access to basic services infrastructures such as hospitals, clinics and services such as water and electricity should be increased, and these services must be upgraded
- Learners should not be left behind under any circumstances. Education should remain accessible and freely accessible sources, such as radio, should become alternatives. Where online learning is required, learners should be provided with the necessary equipment and resources, such as laptops and data.
- Data should be free and/or made cheaply available to ensure that communities that have to shift to online working and learning are not excluded or left behind. The growing digital divide must be eliminated by ensuring that alternatives are easily accessible at little to no cost.

Community participation

- There should be greater communication and engagement between communities and government at all levels. This would foster greater transparency and accountability. Localised imbizos and small parliaments with political decision-makers are examples of the type of consultation process participants want and view as inclusive.
- Information should be disseminated in local languages on popular social media networks, messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, and on the radio.







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