

Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute (SPII)

COVID-19 Policy

Thursday 19 March – Friday 27 March 2020

On the 15 March 2020, President Ramaphosa declared a National State of Disaster, in terms of the Disaster Management Act, in relation to the spread of COVID-19 within South Africa. This was identified as a drastic but necessary measure in order to “protect the people of our country and reduce the impact of the virus on our society and our economy”.

Measures announced in the National address, in order to encourage social distancing included: the closure of schools from Wednesday 18 March; the prohibition of gatherings of more than 100 people; the cancellation of celebrations of upcoming National days such as Human Rights Day; and the discouraging of smaller gatherings stating that when those are unavoidable, that those should implement “stringent measures of prevention and control”.

As at 18 March 2020, there were 116 identified cases of COVID-19 in South Africa, with 61 of those in Gauteng. Being located within Johannesburg, SPII finds itself at the epicentre of the South African epidemic. This reality places great responsibility upon SPII to implement measures such as social distancing.

Furthermore, the Executive Mayor of Johannesburg, Cllr. Geoffrey Makhubo, recently directed the City Manager and MDs/CEOs of Municipal Entities to immediately put in place measures that will allow for the release of Municipal employees to work from home, until further notice, as a mitigation measure against the spread of COVID-19. This will take effect from 20 March 2020.

Up-to-date, verified information on the spread of the virus in South Africa may be found at the following link: <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/>

The immense benefits of social distancing on the potential disease curve can be seen in the modelling below (with the orange portion of the images representing the sick population and the purple portions of the images representing the population that has recovered from being sick)

SPII is committed to the health and well-being of its employees and notes that the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 requires employers to create and maintain a healthy workplace for employees. This is one context in which SPII is implementing social distancing.

A second context in which we are implementing this policy is in relation to our work as a social justice organisation, where social distancing becomes an ethical obligation, orbiting around principals such as care and community, rather than those of fear and panic. As a social justice organisation, we have to remain cognizant of the social-economic implications of the virus and must ensure that we do not act as a vector for the disease to others, particularly to poor communities. It must be noted that within poor communities, the ability to implement social distancing measures is limited by difficult realities such as overcrowding, lack of access to adequate health care, lack of access to running water, and, often, an inability to avoid public transport. These realities mean that the virus could spread exponentially within these settings, potentially leading to a situation where the poor will be disproportionately affected, despite already being overburdened and traumatised by poverty and inequality.

Thus, SPII is interested in implementing policies which mitigate against the transmission of COVID-19, both within the workplace and beyond.

SPII is therefore implementing the following measures for social distancing, effective immediately and to be reassessed on Wednesday 1 April:

- All work that can be facilitated from remote locations will be strongly encouraged not to occur at the office.
- Where staff do need to go in to the office due to unavoidable reasons, they will be supported in order not to have to take public transportation in and out.
- All staff will work from home.
- In supporting staff to work from home, SPII will assist with any necessary data arrangements.
- Staff are to be contactable throughout the 8 hour work day (excluding the one hour during this to be taken for lunch break) via telephone, email and WhatsApp.
- Staff will share weekly work plans by COB on Mondays.
- The collective/collaborative work plan will be shared and consistently updated by all relevant parties on Google Docs.
- Staff will have daily 9am check-ins to discuss daily work plans via Skype.
- Staff will have weekly Skype check-ins at 3pm on Friday afternoons in order to assess how the week's work has gone.
- The use of virtual working will not reduce the respect for private time of SPII staff beyond the working week.
- With the school closure from 18 March 2020, SPII respects the fact that parents will need to dedicate time to parenting their children especially given the concerns about self- isolating.
- SPII will consider its work obligations to Funders against the potential risks and where it is necessary to postpone actions such as trainings, will establish alternative deliverables to propose to the Funders.
- SPII will respect all relevant leave applications during this time.

SPII is interested in ensuring that all staff and stakeholders receive objective, verified information on the pandemic and will endeavour to circulate such information from reliable sources.

SPII will also ensure that all staff are encouraged to practice the necessary hygiene practices at all times.

As mentioned above, SPII will reassess the situation on Wednesday 1 April and should the need for a more comprehensive institutional COVID-19 policy arise, SPII will collaboratively thresh out the details of such.

The National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) has established a COVID-19 helpline for those who suspect that they may have contracted the virus on **0800 029 999**.

If employees are seeking any guidance in relation to the virus, they can refer to South African National COVID-19 WHATSAPP information support line on **060 012 3456**.