



Covid-19 and the Hunger Crisis
Towards a Food Sovereignty and Community Driven Solidarity Partnership
Government, Solidarity Fund and Grassroots Organisations

1. Introduction

Although the South African government has taken decisive action towards control of the Covid-19 pandemic, South Africa's response will fail due to the worsening hunger crisis and loss of income amongst large parts of the population. 'Death by hunger rather than the pandemic' is being expressed by many. The hunger crisis is not new and has been worsened with the lockdown. Government's risk management approach to the lock down strategy, while well intentioned, has been top down and has not had adequate grassroots input. It is also not clear what kind of scientific assessments have informed the opening up of some parts of the economy. Our challenges will also not be solved merely by re-opening an economy that produces joblessness, inequality and hunger. How South Africa acts now will shape its future. The Covid-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to end hunger, build a new people-centered food system that can handle worsening climate shocks and which is democratised. We call this food sovereignty. President Ramaphosa has consistently called for solidarity, partnership and unity. In this spirit we are presenting this proposal to the government and the Solidarity Fund.

2. The Worsening Hunger Crisis

Large parts of South Africa's corporate-controlled food system collapsed during the drought, now in its sixth year. Maize, livestock, fruit and even vegetable production was compromised in many parts of the country. Food prices went up and this intensified food inequality. If Covid-19 had hit during the peak of the drought, South Africa would have had to import food aid. In the context of climate change, climate science has confirmed the country will be getting hotter and drier and experiencing more drought-like conditions. A new food system that is not externalised and which can handle multiple shocks has to be established. South Africa must ensure urgent systemic transformation of its food system now.

Before Covid-19, 30.4 million people (out of a population of 58.8 million) lived under the upper-bounded poverty line of R1227 per month. At least 14 million people were going to bed hungry. Health data highlights 1 in 4 children under 5 years were malnourished. Moreover, stunting of boy children under 5 years is 30% and girl children under 5 years is 25%. Due to low incomes and poverty, 27% of adults are obese and 51.9% are overweight. The lock down has now suspended the livelihoods of a further 4 million people in the informal sector (including 1 million domestic workers, 2.6 million informal traders and thousands of waste reclaimers, car guards, small scale fishers and more). Unemployment was at 10.4 million (38.7%) before Covid-19 and has gone up during the lockdown. In this context the hunger crisis is huge and one estimate suggests at least 30 million people have been experiencing food stress in South Africa during the Covid-19 lock down. This painful reality is widespread in many communities, in both urban and rural settings.

By 14 May 2020, the Department of Social Development had delivered about 525 000 food parcels and the Solidarity Fund about 250 000. With the assumption of four people per household, only 3.1 million have been reached to date. This seems to be the first round of food parcel delivery for recipient households and it is not clear how long these food parcels will last. There are also concerns about the nutritional balance of such food parcels.

Currently, the price of an essential basket of goods (38 food items) has gone up from R3221 to R3470.92 (an increase of 7.8% or R249.42). These increases cancel gains made in the older persons and child grants. In grant-recipient-households there is also more than one mouth to feed which places a lot of stress on resources. The median wage in South Africa is R3500 which puts immense pressure on households, given competing needs. The current cost of a domestic and personal household hygiene products basket is R694.74. Food in poor households, capable of buying an essential basket of goods, now lasts just two weeks rather than three weeks. The Covid-19 relief grant is simply insufficient and represents a missed opportunity to break with a welfare approach that 'disciplines the desperation of the poor'.

The high rate of unemployment also puts pressure on those who are employed, as they have to provide for family members who are unemployed, and this has led to uncontrollable debts and depression.

Pre-existing food relief efforts in a number of communities have been scaled up in many communities. Many emergency relief efforts have also come to the fore including attempts to utilise food vouchers that support local spaza shops and community food suppliers. However, many of these community-led initiatives are now facing severe constraints. Financial and regulatory challenges loom large. Under level 4 restrictions there have been attempts to prohibit and over-regulate community feeding schemes, soup kitchens and other relief efforts. This is a mistake and will worsen the hunger crisis.

Hunger flashpoints such as food truck hijackings, attacks on supermarkets and street protests have also come to the fore during lockdown due to the hunger crisis. Social discontent and desperation are on the increase, reflecting the limits of the current food relief effort.

3. A Food Sovereignty Vision to End Hunger

Hunger will not be eradicated by food corporations in South Africa. In a deeply unequal society with high levels of unemployment, commodified food merely reinforces food inequality. Those with income eat, and those without remain hungry.

Food sovereignty recognises that food is produced by our ecosystems – birds, bees, worms, biodiversity, human labour and people's choices. This means all these socio-ecological forces must be given the power to prevail over our food system. Food for need rather than food for profit means everybody eats. We eat what our ecosystem provides for us.

A democratically organised food system controlled by small-scale food producers, consumers and society means we can co-govern the soil, land, water, biodiversity and knowledge commons. It affirms our constitutional right to food, water and a healthy environment. Moreover, these commons-based resources are managed in a life-giving manner rather than being exploited, polluted and destroyed.

Agro-ecology as a people's science is central to such a practice. It places an ethics of care, the building blocks of nature and small scale producers' knowledge at the centre of food production practices. Food produced for need benefits from local indigenous knowledge as people learn to eat to live, while affirming nutritious choices and their cultural appreciation of food.

Food sovereignty for all envisages every community, village, town and city feeding themselves through sharing, democratically managing and protecting the commons. Such pathways need to be scaled up now and have been in the making at the grassroots (see <https://www.safsc.org.za/peoples-food-sovereignty-act/>)

4. Principles for a Solidarity Partnership

To address the scale of the hunger crisis in a transformative manner, a food sovereignty and community-driven partnership has to be locked into place now with the government and the Solidarity Fund. The following principles should guide this partnership:

- Solidarity – by supporting, working with and embracing all who live in South Africa that are in need;
- Community led – informed by the needs, concerns and leadership within communities;
- Dialogue – to enable learning, listening, sharing and joint problem solving;
- Advance and protect the commons – land, water, biodiversity, the biosphere, human effort and knowledge must be supported as the basis for food provisioning.

5. Food Sovereignty and Community Driven Food Crisis Strategy

There are four key strategic elements for this food sovereignty and community-driven partnership with government and the Solidarity Fund:

5.1 Widening Food Relief Efforts through State and Community Networks

The Department of Social Development has used its own food banks, beneficiary lists and logistics capacities to tackle immediate food relief. The Solidarity Fund has also partnered with certain humanitarian organisations and food NGOs. These are reactive mechanisms, or 'supply side', which are crucial. However, a needs based approach that is community driven, has to be added to the national effort. Community organisations, community action networks, faith based organisations, community supply chains, local movements and various other grassroots relief efforts which have been triggered, have to be connected into the national effort.

5.2 Unlocking the Food Commons and Scaling Up Food Sovereignty Pathways

In poor communities, 70% of poor households source their food locally. Household gardening, community gardeners, small scale farmers, subsistence fishers, informal traders and community feeding schemes are all part of the food commons in South Africa. Lock down regulations (level 5 and 4) have shut down most of the food commons, contributing to the hunger crisis. Unlocking the food commons is crucial for all levels of lockdown and as we go forward. Moreover, food sovereignty pathways and hubs that advance agro-ecological practice, commoning, demonstrate socially owned

renewable energy, zero waste and solidarity economy practices are crucial. This would ensure eco-centric production and consumption are connected for localised, people centered food sovereignty systems.

5.3 Ethical Pricing, Solidarity Buying and Peoples Pantries in Supermarkets

The cost of essential goods is increasing, particularly amid the Covid-19 pandemic. This has to be stopped and if necessary regulated in the corporate controlled food value chain. Food corporations have to be engaged to support the national effort to meet food needs including ending 'food waste' in the value chain. Ethical pricing of essential goods, provision of ethically priced solidarity buying packages and peoples pantries, even online must be introduced. Consumers can donate to these initiatives and this can be distributed through the military, police, and other essential government services, but monitored by local community and faith leaders. The needs of rural communities have to be taken into account through such initiatives.

5.4 Advancing a Substantive Basic Income Grant

Social grants in South Africa, including the Covid-19 relief grant, are inadequate to meet household needs. We need a transformative approach that ensures we tackle hunger, unemployment, transition challenges related to the worsening climate crisis and provide security to all. Currently there are campaigns in 95 countries to ensure a basic income grant is locked into place – a #BIGNOW is secured. The Pope has supported such a call and the UN General Secretary has also been asked to come out in support of the #BIGNOW. The South African Food Sovereignty Campaign is leading the #BIGNOW initiative supported by trade unions, unemployed people's organisations, informal traders, faith based organisations and NGOs. In October when the Minister of Finance suspends the Covid-19 Relief grant and all social grant top-ups, South Africa will continue to muddle through with high inequality and desperation. The #BIGNOW can consolidate our welfare system, ensure aggregate demand comes to the fore to stimulate the economy and we have a people-led recovery that does not leave anyone behind.

6. **A Solidarity Partnership – Towards a National Food Crisis Forum**

The South African Food Sovereignty Campaign will be convening a National Food Crisis Forum of rooted movements, NGOs and humanitarian organisations and will invite the government and the Solidarity Fund to participate in this forum. The primary objectives of this forum include:

- Advancing the key elements of the food sovereignty and community driven food crisis strategy;
- Coordinating with government and the Solidarity Fund;
- Sharing information with the public and media;
- Monitoring and tracking hunger flashpoints to enable effective responses.

7. **Phases of Implementation**

There are three phases to implementing the food sovereignty and community driven partnership with government and the solidarity fund. These phases will overlap at the level of practice and implementation.

- Phase 1 – establishing the National Food Crisis Forum, operationalise the widening of food relief efforts, map and make visible the food commons using the SAFSC online tool (<https://www.safsc.org.za/food-commons-map/>), build a directory of grassroots food relief efforts, also engage supermarkets on their role and engage government on opening up the food commons within the national lock down strategy;
- Phase 2 – establish 1000 food sovereignty hubs, a minimum of 100 per province as the backbone capacity for coordinating food sovereignty pathway building in communities, villages, towns and cities. Such hubs to be anchored by grassroots organisations for commoning, as learning spaces and coordination spaces for local food sovereignty alliances. Such hubs are already taking root and include: seedling nurseries, seed banks, agro-ecology training spaces, zero waste and collective composting systems, water harvesting, socially owned renewable energy, equipment banks, training resource libraries, communal kitchens, demonstration gardens and convene local food markets. They are spaces to train households, community gardeners, small scale farmers and promote ethical care for forests, oceans and veld based commons, that might be available to communities.
- Phase 3 – engage government and society on the #BIGNOW for South Africa

8. Challenges

This process faces three challenges:

- The reluctance by some in government to engage in a partnership with progressive civil society to address the worsening hunger crisis;
- The lack of a shared strategic understanding of the moment and the systemic approach needed to address the food crisis and a crisis ridden food system;
- Divisions, petty differences and 'territorial politics' in civil society.

9. Conclusion

Hunger is not new to South Africa. It is a serious social challenge and has been worsened by Covid-19. Together with the loss of income, South Africa is facing a very volatile and dangerous situation over the next few months. We have to confront these challenges in a manner that eradicates hunger, builds a new food system now and ensures a people led economic recovery through a #BIGNOW. We believe the time has come for a food sovereignty and community driven solidarity partnership with government and the Solidarity Fund to make this happen.

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List of Endorsing Organisations

1. Abanebhongo Persons with Disabilities
2. Active Citizens Movement
3. Africa Diaspora Workers Network
4. African Centre for Biodiversity
5. African Climate Reality Project
6. Amandla Collective
7. Amandla Resource and Information Centre
8. Amava Oluntu
9. Anglican Church Diocese of Swaziland
10. Anglican Church of Southern Africa Environmental Network
11. Arya Samaj
12. Austerville Project Committee
13. Biowatch SA
14. Black Sash
15. C19 Peoples Coalition Food Working Group
16. Cape Town Interfaith Initiative
17. Centre for Complex Systems in Transition, Stellenbosch University
18. Childrens Resource Centre
19. Christian Development Trust Foundation NPC
20. Cissie Gool House Community Garden
21. Consumer Action Network
22. Cooperative and Policy Alternative Centre
23. Crystal Horizons Youth Centre (CHYC)
24. Earthrise Trust
25. Elemental Africa Farm and Resource Hub
26. Elsies River Business Forum
27. Elsies River Community Action Network
28. Elsies River Informal Traders Association
29. Engineers Without Borders- Wits
30. Environmental Learning Research Centre at Rhodes University,
31. Food Equity, Equality and Democracy
32. Food Flow ZA
33. Food Secure Now NPC
34. Foundation for Human Rights
35. Frack Free South Africa
36. Gandhi Development Trust
37. Gauge Capability
38. Gauteng Food Governance Community of Practice
39. Gay and Lesbian Network
40. Gender CC
41. Green Business College
42. Growing Sustainable Farmers (GSF)
43. Hebron Mango Tree Owner Primary Cooperative Limited (Ltd)
44. Ikhaya Garden

45. Inala Forum for Food Sovereignty and Climate Justice, Wits
46. Inspire Network
47. Institute for Economic Justice
48. Intercontinental Network of Organic Farmer Organisations (INOFO) (South Africa Chapter)
49. International Labour Research and Information Group
50. Izwi Domestic Workers Alliance
51. Johannesburg Against Injustice
52. Kensington (JHB) Community Action Network
53. Khulumani Support Group
54. Kirchliche Arbeitsstelle Südliches Afrika KASA (Ecumenical Service on Southern Africa)
55. Kusile Women Empowerment
56. KZN Subsistence Fisherfolks
57. Land Access Movement of South Africa
58. Makers Valley Partnership
59. Marena Kingdom Nutrients Enterprise
60. Masifundise Development Trust
61. Modikidiki Simply Green Vegetables
62. Molobanyane Cooperative
63. Mopani Farmers Association
64. Mpophomeni Conservation Group
65. Muizenberg CAN
66. Naledi
67. Ntinga Ntaba kaNdoda
68. Nyathiziyalima Farming Primary Cooperative
69. Observatory CAN
70. Observatory Civic Association,
71. Oribi Village
72. Phoenix Settlement Trust
73. Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group
74. Poor Flat Dwellers Movement
75. Rethinking Economics for Africa
76. Reunion Airports Farmers Association
77. Seriti Institute
78. sharp#EcoSocialistCollective
79. Slow Food Community of KZN Midlands
80. Slow Food South Africa
81. Socio Economic Rights Institute
82. Solidarity
83. Solidarity Strategy Institute
84. Soul on Indigenous Life
85. South African Comprehensive Agroecology National Initiative
86. South African Informal Traders Alliance
87. South Durban Community Environmental Alliance
88. Southern Africa Migration Network (SAMIN)
89. Southern African Faith Communities Environment Institute
90. Southern African Food Lab

91. Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute
92. Support Centre for Land Change
93. Sustainable Innovations Africa
94. Thousand Herbs and Vegetable Garden Agricultural Cooperative LTD
95. Trust for Community Outreach and Education
96. Tshwane Leadership Foundation
97. Ubunya Bama Hostelle
98. UFS Food Sovereignty Campaign
99. Umkomaas Anti-Pollution Watchdog
100. Unemployed Peoples Movement
101. UNITED PUBLIC SAFETY FRONT
102. Vhembe Agro-processing Cooperative
103. Victoria Yards
104. Wentworth Development Forum
105. West Coast Food Sovereignty and Solidarity Forum
106. Western Cape Food Governance Community of Practice
107. Wits Physics School Council
108. WoMin
109. Workers World Media
110. WWF
111. XR- National