
Food Security in the context of COVID-19 in South Africa: a Civil Society Perspective

Discussion document



This document is termed a 'discussion document' to illicit comments and responses

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1. Aim of Document

To provide a discussion document for how Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in South Africa can contribute to ensuring food security for South Africans during the unprecedented crises presented by COVID-19: for the many, not the few.

The document should be used as a basis for:

- Reviewing the South African Government’s COVID-19 emergency response in terms of how it is supporting food security, particularly for marginalized constituencies, and to assist in planning;
- Discussion on how to advance equitable access to critical food security measures in both rural and urban households during this crisis;
- Discussion on how Civil Society Organisations can support marginalized communities in terms of their food security needs during this time.

2. Food Security for the many - not the few

The immediate and forthcoming disruptions of food production, value chains and access to food in South Africa due to confinement measures to contain the spread of Covid-19 create enormous food security risks for already vulnerable households. Nearly half of all households across the country already experienced hunger or insufficient daily food prior to the Covid-19 disaster announcements. Media reports since the lockdown indicate that the majority of households do not have savings, rely on the distribution of grants in order to purchase food, and tend to buy in bulk from commercial retailers. There is a need for a collaborative, national pro-poor programme to fill the gaps in Government’s initial responses to the pandemic and the lockdown measures, to urgently advance equitable access to food during the COVID-19 pandemic, where CSOs can play a crucial role.

CSOs have direct systems of communication with South Africa’s most vulnerable communities and maintain and manage databases on these communities. This enables CSOs to share and receive information rapidly from vulnerable communities. The communities trust their CSO partners, who understand their unique contexts. Government does not have these relationships or this information, which puts CSOs in a crucial position to work with Government and other agencies to support food security during this time. The communities include small-scale producers, small-scale fishers, farm workers and dwellers, deep rural communities, those in informal settlements and poor urban and peri-urban communities, and those living on communal and traditional land. Many of these

communities also have high levels of violence and drug and alcohol abuse. One of the main implications of the lockdown on communication in vulnerable communities is that activists are not permitted to move around the communities in which they organise, thus severely hampering access to information.

LandNNES affiliates and social justice organisations promote flexible and adaptive locality specific planning and implementation initiatives, which are based on participatory research, learning and monitoring approaches. These approaches can make a vital contribution to food security for the many rather than the better off few who live in urban areas.

To work towards food security for the majority, CSO is able to rapidly mobilise interventions at the following four crucial areas of the food systems, namely:

1. Food Production.
2. Food Distribution.
3. House-hold access to food.
4. Cross-Cutting Issue: the argument for a single, open access spatial data infrastructure.

2.1. Food Production

- a) **Improved Communication:** information is power. Information to make rapid, informed decisions is pivotal during this time. Having the means to receive and send information will keep fishers and farmers informed and protected. Many of these will not be reached with the specific information they need to continue farm production and fishing safely at this time, beyond the broad and general health and lockdown measures that are communicated through Government communication systems and the mainstream media. Small and subsistence farmers urgently need access to a range of Information:
- a. Where they can obtain permits and essential service certificates so that they can go to town to purchase farm inputs and to be on the streets to sell their produce?
 - b. Which agricultural supply shops are open, at what times, where and for who?
 - c. Which markets small scale farmers and fishers can supply right now and in the next 2-3-4 months? What initiatives and procedures are available during lockdown to support local and informal markets in order to decentralise the distribution of food?
 - d. Where can farmers get information on crop and livestock diseases right now?

CSOs have targeted communications and databases that can get relevant information to these key producer groups as a starting point, but need support to do so, and to get access to the information they need to pass on to producers, which is not readily available. Support to establish digital platforms for extension support and market access would enable urgent responses to immediate needs, and help to consolidate and expand small scale farmer and fisher lists.

- b) **Supplies to small and subsistence producers:** there is a huge risk in many agricultural suppliers only focusing on larger commercial producers, and it is critical to ensure that these suppliers are not only seen as essential services, but continue to supply seed and seedlings, equipment, veterinary supplies, and others services to small and subsistence producers. We have already had reports of suppliers reporting they are only supplying “commercial farmers” during the lockdown. CSOs can rapidly support small producers and agricultural suppliers to make available information for how to obtain permits and essential service certificates. CSOs could also monitor exclusions and be on call to ensure that police and retailers are not closing out small and subsistence producers and their suppliers.

- c) **Increasing production capacity at local level:** CSOs have contact with many subsistence farmers that make surplus food available to their communities, but continue to be challenged by inadequate resources and the lack of Government support to date. They could rapidly increase their production levels if they supported with equipment and other key inputs at this critical moment to meet localised food needs. CSOs can share lists or organise for funds and equipment to reach farmers who can quickly increase production. A mass roll out of input support through major agricultural suppliers and supported by information through CSOs would rapidly address localised production constraints.
- d) **It is crucial that farmers are made aware of employer's responsibilities to provide their workers with a safe working environment, and this is monitored and enforced.** Farm workers are reporting to CSOs that commercial farmers are continuing with their operations without providing protection to workers. At uMshwathi for an example, the dominant agricultural commodity is sugarcane and forestry, and operations are running smoothly. However, farm workers are not being provided with preventative or protective measures, such as gloves and sanitizers, putting workers and production at risk. Furthermore, farm workers are reporting that farm owners are prohibiting their movement into towns putting their food security at risk. **CSOs can assist in letting farm workers know where they can report unsafe working conditions, if they can be assured of a swift response from Government to intervene.**
- e) **Small-Scale Fishers:** The announcement from the Minister of Environmental Affairs, Forestry and Fisheries, (DEFF) Barbara Creecy last week that fishing activities would be exempted from the lockdown because of its importance to domestic food was well received by small-scale fishing communities, even though it increases their chances of contracting the virus greatly. Undoubtedly this epidemic is placing huge pressure on them to secure their livelihoods, feed their families and their communities. The following are some urgent measures that would contribute to their sustainable livelihoods and food security during this time:
- **Access to bulk refrigeration facilities:** this will relieve the pressure of food insecurity and limit exposure to the virus. When they fish in bulk they can preserve to last for a day's/month.
 - **Pre-harvesting assistance:** Fishers spend hundreds of rand per fishing trip with no guarantee of a catch. The procurement of nationally produced bait and assistance with petrol costs will minimize poverty faced. Petrol monies saved could help them buy other food produce needed.
- f) **Small-scale local food producers are being shut down** at just the time in which they need the most support and could be making a crucial contribution: for example, in KwaZulu Natal, adjacent to uMshwathi and Wartburg is the Swayimani community. Most of the community members in this community are small scale sugarcane farmers. These farmers reported on the 31st March 2020 that they have been shut down due to the Coronavirus pandemic, as they have access to their usual markets, and they are losing their income as a result. Other small scale farmers who are making a living out of cropping vegetables and selling them in local markets and at the streets are also losing income.
- g) Water distribution should not just focus on household consumption, but also for small farmers who have continued to struggle with water access for production. **CSOs can provide lists and locations of farmers in need of this assistance.**

2.2. Food Distribution

- a) **Local markets, hawkers, and bakkie traders have been shut down at exactly the time they need to be open:** small scale farmers who are making a living out of cropping vegetables and selling them in local markets and in the streets have reported that they been shut down, and are losing all the income they rely on, and not able to provide affordable food for sale locally. Current estimates put the contribution of street traders at 40% of the township economy.¹ The impact of the absence of fresh food in townships and informal settlements is not yet known, but given this statistic it is likely to be substantial. It is critical that Government works with CSOs to find ways to introduce measures to get local markets up and running, with health measures in place, as quickly as possible. CSOs can further assist in co-ordinating local markets in order to minimize the possibilities of contract COVID-19, for example setting up better structures and meeting on specific days rather than daily. To do so, organised interest groups need access to permits to enable their movement. Nutrition and hygiene should become integral parts of empowering rural women producers. **CSOs can be supported to establish digital platforms to support local markets and linkages between producers and consumers.**
- b) **Information, information, information:** Enabling CSOs to be capacitated to use a wider variety of means to communicate with the communities they work with, including data-free and other social media sites, Whatsapp and bulk sms services, for example to let rural household know where they can go to purchase what they need: supplies, groceries, and which farmers have surplus stock or produce. They can also educate communities on the importance of supporting local small producers.
- c) **Improved local marketing:** the value of local marketing and helping to create local opportunities will ensure that good nutritional food remains in the community and limits interactions with others coming into the community to collect food and fish. This will also limit producers and fishers exposure to the virus. **This links to a) and b) above, as CSOs can further empower small producers and fishers to use such platforms to share information and for marketing.**
- d) Food security is intricately bound up with livelihoods. Small-scale and commercial farmers, as well as street traders, have lost access to their usual customers, either due to people being on lockdown, being shut out of informal trading spaces, or for more formal producers, school feeding schemes, restaurants, and so on. They have surplus stock that is being thrown away. In the course of the first week on lockdown, street traders have expressed concerns that, even if they sell grocery items, including fresh food, they are not considered an essential service. Furthermore, they do not expect to be tolerated on the streets, opening up the prospects of police brutality.² **CSOs can support small-scale producers to register as legal entities with the Compensation for Intellectual Property Commission or the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition in order to receive certificates as essential services.** Government could fast-track supplier systems to widen

¹ PLAAS

² Spaza shops are allowed to trade but informal traders are not as per clarification by Minister Cele regarding the closure of spaza shops. Informal traders will be exposed to the risk of heavy-handed enforcement of the regulations.

the capacity to purchase excess production for redistribution to poor households, hospitals, correction centres and other Government facilities and keep struggling farms viable during this time, ensuring food production can continue and more farm workers do not lose employment. While the merits of applying for certificates in the case of street traders might be debated from a health and safety perspective, it is important to note that informal workers are not covered by the UIF and COIDA provisions. Government needs to support their livelihoods in other ways.

2.3. Household-level Access to food

- a) **Improved Communication:** information is power. Having information to make informed decisions will be pivotal during this time. Having the means to receive and send information will keep fishers, small scale farmers and informal traders informed and protected.
- b) It will be important for Government and other agencies to **monitor the availability of staple foods that poorer communities rely on**, both locally produced and imported, and to monitor if the situation in other countries will impact on supplies to South Africa. With a weakening rand, it will also be crucial to ensure that important staple foods remain available to and affordable for poor families. Although maize production is expected to exceed previous years, poor households face constraints on accessing this staple through centralised retailers as a result of reduced taxi transport and the distribution of social grants that is limited to once a month, causing crowds of desperate consumers at shops and taxi ranks. **CSOs can support the distribution of staples to small and informal retailers (spaza and tuck shops, street hawkers) by making information about distribution procedures under lockdown available to them, and ensuring they are certified as essential services.**
- c) It will be critical for Government to protect poor communities from the **devastating effect of further basic food price inflation**, which has already been hitting families hard in recent times, prior to the pandemic. While there are many different measures used for calculating the rising cost of a basic food basket, the Food Justice Collective calculates a basket of nutritious food for a family of four, based on actual spending patterns of households in poor communities, to be R8000 per month. Anything short of that results in gradual malnutrition, yet this was far beyond the reach of most vulnerable communities even prior to the impacts of COVID-19.
- d) **Those outside the formal systems are most vulnerable to food insecurity:** Vulnerable individuals who do not qualify for a grant might experience severe food insecurity if special measures are not taken. Formal and informal workers that do not access social grants are particularly vulnerable. Special measures to be taken for ensuring ad hoc cash and food relief during the crisis. While Government does have a “Social relief of distress” grant, which they are trying to make this available via telephone only when many vulnerable rural people do not have cell phones or expensive airtime, or means to get to urban areas where these may be found. In addition, Government notes on the Department for Social Development Website regarding access to social grants during the lockdown that “lack of public transport may severely affect beneficiaries’ ability to get to points to access their grants.” **Government must liaise with CSOs to ensure that all marginalised and vulnerable citizens are reached with these special measures – both ad hoc cash and food relief.**
- e) Many **CSOs that usually provide nutritious meals, especially to children and the elderly, have now had to go into lockdown.** Many of them have facilities large enough to enable

social distancing, but Government has communicated that they can only provide food to these children via food parcels (which often do not reach the children in a family most in need of them, particularly when there are large families, and especially when there are those with drug and alcohol addictions in the family, where food is often sold or traded to feed addictions. The other option Government will allow is to cook every day and have children or parents coming every day to collect the cooked meal as a takeaway, which once again means that CSOs can't monitor whether the child is actually the one eating it or not. Government needs to work more constructively with CSOs to enable them to continue to deliver such vital services. Schools, which are currently empty, could be used to distribute these meals.

- f) In rural areas, a large portion of food security for children comes from the **feeding scheme at schools**. Sometimes this constitutes a large percentage of the daily nutritional intake of children in these (and other) areas. The other one in many parts of rural areas are **soup kitchens for elderly**. In both cases, the risks of these are that it breaks social distancing imperatives. However, it also boosts the immunity levels of the immuno-vulnerable in communities. CSO and Government could work with existing models with potential, together with the re-evaluation and design of local markets, to re-invent ways to promote higher levels of immunity through restructuring these services. Additionally, this works as a communication channel.
- g) Many **CSOs have assisted communities to self-organise**, for example some have committees per street and per block of flats, or rural communities have elected people as first points of contact for any need in a particular community or area. They can identify families in need and know where drug and alcohol addiction, for example, are a challenge. These community networks should be tapped into by Government in working efficiently with meeting community needs, and CSOs can facilitate this. Many communities also have food kitchens which are in dire need of supplies (both food and gloves, sanitiser etc) to feed communities.
- h) As many vulnerable communities don't have electricity and therefore can't keep non-perishable foods for long, **food parcels need to be predominantly nutritious non-perishables** that will last.
- i) **Local markets are absolutely crucial to provide urgent support measures to for vulnerable communities to access food in nearby, affordable locations. Small scale retailers must be licenced as an essential service**: Spaza shops are sometimes more expensive than supermarkets but much more accessible within communities, and some have key items at cheaper prices than supermarkets. Informal fruit and vegetable stalls must be supported to stay open and get supplies, and will Government and CSO support to be able to meet the sanitation requirements to stop the spread of the virus. They have fresh produce that is affordable for those who can't buy in advance and store food. It can't be stressed enough that the lack of transport during the lockdown, and restrictions during social distancing, will make it even more difficult for marginalised communities to access sources of food, even if they have the financial means provided to them by Government to be able to do so.
- j) In informal settlements a crisis is looming. Without income, with limited or no savings to fall back on, and with informal street traders on lockdown, urban poor households are extremely vulnerable to food insecurity. Since schools have been closed, school feeding schemes are not functioning. For many children this has been their main meal of the day. Public transport (to buy food) is not fully functional and many local spazas are closed. Food parcels are an urgent priority but the logistics around their availability need to be carefully worked out. The

direct delivery of food should be considered, as expecting the urban poor to move significant distances to centralised supply points is unlikely to address the problem and runs the risk of spreading the pandemic. Communication with settlement leaders will be a key priority in this respect. An alternative to this approach would be food voucher dissemination: combined with ensuring that spaza shops do in fact remain open, that their supply is guaranteed and that emergency access to water is provided.³

2.4. Cross-Cutting Issue: the argument for a single, open access spatial data infrastructure

The best defence humans have today against this and other viruses and pathogens is information. Covid-19 presents a rare opportunity to reconfigure South Africa's geospatial data. Geospatial data provides scientific evidence for monitoring economic and environmental challenges at various scales, and can contribute significantly to improving food security at all levels, from production through to household food security. It provides tools for mapping, analysis and modelling.

The use of data technologies that link individuals, households or communities to particular spatial locations are widely available. Although South Africa has a National Spatial Data Infrastructure held within the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform, it has failed to appreciate the importance of the link between geospatial data and sustainable development. The way that the spread of Covid-19 at different scales (national, province and local) has been monitored highlights a disconnect between geospatial data/information and the national information systems. Some of the challenges South Africa is facing in monitoring spread of Covid-19 are a reflection of our developing economy context and the lag in technology adoption.

South Africa urgently needs to develop a national address system as an important part of the country's Spatial Data Initiative (SDI). An address is more than just a place. It plays a critical role in the wider social, economic, governance and administrative functions. An address is necessary to be recognised as a citizen, to vote, to obtain an identity document, to open a bank account. Indeed, it could be argued that an address is the first step in enabling individuals to participate in the economy.

South Africa already has many institutions that collect and maintain address databases such as Statistics South Africa (StatsSA); the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC); spatial data/information vendors such as AfriGIS and Knowledge Factory; GIS departments within municipalities; property valuation rolls within municipalities; South African Post Office (SAPO); Telkom; Eskom; consulting town planners; private companies etc. These multiple databases vary in their spatial coverage and also use different formats and infrastructures for capturing and storing addresses. The uncoordinated and unregulated collection and storage of data across the entities results in duplications, gaps and misinformation relating to addresses. The Covid-19 disaster presents a rare opportunity to fix this problem.

³ These ideas rely on email correspondence amongst upgrading practitioners, including human settlement officials, initiated by Mark Misselhorn of the Project Preparation Trust, including Wits academic Marie Huzchermeyer's response on food vouchers.

On a global scale the combination of ICT and geospatial technologies make it possible to visualise the spread of the virus spatially (see <https://destinationsinternational.org/covid-19-facts-visualization>). However, while data on a global scale is important, it is not the appropriate scale for national and local scale response. The ability to track the spread and to respond requires accurate, current, detailed geospatial data. While tests are being carried out at various points, the time lag between the testing and test result is posing a challenge, more especially with people moving around in space. The second major challenge is the inability to link test results to space. In South Africa the specific challenge of the absence of a single national address database excludes many South Africans in informal settlements and rural areas from the possibility of spatial referencing.

There are measures that the government could take to resolve this problem with speed. Firstly, the provisions of the disaster could be unleashed, for the purposes of amalgamating all address data sets that are held by multiple state entities into a single infrastructure. Secondly, the same measures could be used to expropriate all the fragmented address data sets which are held by multiple private sector entities. This exercise would result in a single national database, which would obviously require cleansing over the short to medium term. This exercise would link every South African to a physical address and to space, and provide a tool to link the virus to space.

An integrated national spatial data infrastructure would provide an additional tool for the management of the Covid-19 disaster as well as any other disasters that should befall the country, including climate change and economic distress. Importantly for the immediate, it would underpin and enable the mass roll out of the food security measures proposed above.

3. Summary of 10 key actionable recommendations that CSOs can contribute to:

- 3.1. **Information and Communication:** CSOs should be supported to use, consolidate and improve their databases and expand their communication systems through which they share with and receive critical information from South Africa's most vulnerable communities, both producers and those in need of access to food, and to Government and other agencies to support food security during this time. Digital platforms are widely used across Africa and other developing countries to link producers and consumers, and producers to markets. South Africa can rapidly support the adoption of such platforms as an extension to the existing communication platforms and strategies that CSOs have in place. Furthermore, permits for NGOs and CBOs to assist with mobilisation, communication and education should be obtained.
- 3.2. **Supplies to small and subsistence producers:** CSOs could support small and subsistence producers to register as an essential service and monitor and be on call to ensure that police and retailers are not closing out small and subsistence producers and their suppliers.
- 3.3. **Increasing production capacity at local level:** CSOs have contact with many subsistence farmers that make food available to their communities. CSOs can share lists or organise for funds, inputs and equipment to reach small and subsistence farmers who can quickly increase production.
- 3.4. **It is crucial that farmers are made aware of employer's responsibilities to provide their workers with a safe working environment, and this is monitored and enforced.** CSOs can

assist in letting farm workers know where they can report unsafe working conditions, if they can be assured of a swift response from Government to intervene.

- 3.5. **Small-Scale Fishers need access to bulk refrigeration facilities and pre-harvesting assistance:** CSOs can work with Government to ensure these measures are supplied where they are most needed and can have the greatest impact on food security.
- 3.6. **Small-scale local food producers must be supported to continue producing.**
- 3.7. **Water distribution should not just focus on household consumption, but also for small farmers who have continued to struggle with water access for production.** CSOs can provide lists and locations of farmers in need of this assistance.
- 3.8. **Local markets, hawkers, spaza shops and bakkie traders must be able to continue trading.** It is critical that Government works with CSOs to find ways to introduce measures to get local markets up and running, with health measures in place, as quickly as possible. CSOs can further assist in co-ordinating local markets in order to minimize the possibilities of contract COVID-19, for example setting up better structures and meeting on specific days rather than daily.
- 3.9. **Small-scale producers and retailers will need support to register as an essential service** with the Compensation for Intellectual Property Commission or the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition. Government could then fast-track supplier systems to widen the capacity to purchase excess production for redistribution to poor households, hospitals, correction centres and other Government facilities.
- 3.10. Support LandNNES and other CSOs to work immediately with Government to develop a single, open access spatial data infrastructure that can assist with Government's plans to use technology to track COVID-19, and addressing food security issues.

In conclusion, LandNNES recommends the establishment of a Food Security Sector Engagement Covid-19 Platform with the Department for Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, the Department of Human Settlements, and other key sector actors. Although the platform should not be exclusive to LandNNES, the network offers to mobilise civil society and academic participant organisations to engage on this platform as a matter of urgency. The platform should be seen as a communication and information sharing initiative.