



COVID-19 LOCKDOWN: WEEK 5

From the desk of our Executive Director

29 April 2020

In my last bulletin on 9 April, I reported how BESG, among 10 NGOs around the country, had been requested by the National Department of Human Settlements to partner in responding to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic in our informal settlements, where much of our routine work is carried out. In our first collective engagement with the Department on 1 April, we had identified the most urgent responses being to provide, or facilitate, access to public health information, water, clean toilets, and food aid.



Water and sanitation -- or, "How can you practice washing hands if you have no water supply?"

The first support work we undertook on 2-4 April was a rapid assessment by telephone and WhatsApp of the levels of existing water and sanitation provision in 15 settlements across the province. We were asked to identify two designated persons per community who could be issued with essential worker travel permits in order to assist with logistics on the ground. Two of our Human Settlements team, Khulekani Mfeka and Nomtha Sikhosana, were accredited to perform essential services.

Unfortunately, that is largely where the cooperation ended. Our list of emergency water and sanitation services needs was referred to the Central Joint Command structure. There was no communication after that point as to whether the message had reached its destination, or reporting back. It is hardly surprising given that these services are the normally the responsibility of local municipalities and water services authorities, and everyone is working under emergency conditions – but *is* the system working?

We set out to assess whether, and record when, there was any effective response to call-outs for assistance with basic services. Many reports were not of an emergency nature – pit latrines that have not been emptied in 15 years, and Communal Ablution Blocks that are closed due to lack of maintenance and repairs and basic cleaning materials. We embarked on two exercises:

1. **Observation** - we called round our community leadership on a periodic basis to record any visible service delivery on the ground. To date only 2 of the 15 settlements we are monitoring have seen any sign of government activity: KZN Health went into Shiyabazali, Howick, with a batch of leaflets (but no water or personal hygiene supplies); and last weekend the community of Mkondeni Sacca, Pietermaritzburg, had their standpipes increased from 2 to 6 – that serves over 1,500 families. These government interventions were haphazard and uncoordinated. Health Department workers also descended unannounced on Gomora, Pietermaritzburg, with screening and testing equipment, and were summarily chased out of the area because their mission was not understood.
2. **Customer Support** -- we conducted a telephonic survey of emergency contact numbers in the 7 local municipalities where our community partners are located, and the National Water and Sanitation Helpline. 5 municipalities had a toll free emergency contact number, but only 2 could be described as responsive and fully functional. We tried the **National Water and Sanitation Covid-19 hotline – 0800 200 200** – and, although the response time was very slow, they handled our calls effectively. We had the sense that they know how to route calls through the Command Centre structure to officials who are able to make things happen. See the summary report at [Annexure A](#).

Food security

When you have an unemployment rate of 29%, a large segment of the population dependent on self-employment and casual labour, and you then enforce a stay-at-home, it is a no brainer that people are going to go hungry. Yet, on the announcement of the lockdown, the state entity responsible for disaster and poverty relief -- the Department of Social Development -- closed its doors.

On 5 April we were contacted by sister NGO the Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA) to participate in a food aid distribution programme sponsored by the Solidarity Fund and administered via the Raith Foundation. On 15 April we heard the programme was approved, and were thrust into 48 hours of logistical turmoil – where to store, and how to transport to multiple sites in the middle of a lockdown, with only the office floor, two essential workers with travel permits, a single cab bakkie and a sedan.

But it was not to be. On 16 April President Ramaphosa announced, as part of a R50bn package of relief and aid measures, that the Department of Social Development, in conjunction with the Solidarity Fund and “NGOs”, would be distributing 250,000 parcels of food aid over the coming 2 weeks. On 21 April we heard that that the food aid AFRA had been told to expect had been diverted to another route. We were shattered, and quietly relieved that we had not let all our community partners know of our endeavours until we were sure – only Ezinketheni, who were to be first in line, and who had seen the weekly soup kitchen run by Mama Ntombi’s Community Projects cease operation at the start of the lockdown. The situation was dire.

It was not only that prepared food was banned under the lockdown. The authorities have made it virtually impossible for “non-essential” movement, and the media is littered with stories of people practicing *ubuntu* under the radar of the authorities and in extremely trying conditions. The NGOs protested to the Department that our community leaders had been asked to be on standby to assist, and were now being denied travel permits. In reply they sent us a copy of KZN CoGTA Circular 18/2020, which mandates Municipal Managers to regulate the conduct of NGOs via accreditation and control of movement “*in (sic) to avoid further conflict and possible arrests by the law enforcement agencies.*”



Children from Shiyabazali wait in an orderly queue for a food parcel from the Angels Care Centre, Howick. (The Witness)

That is a tall order when most municipalities are functioning with emergency services staff only – if at all. As I submitted to the National Task Team, there are churches, temples, all sorts trying to lend a hand. Government should be focusing on CoGTA’s stated functions of coordination *and support* – taking note of where civil society is providing food aid, directing government food aid to areas that have both a high vulnerability index and no independent support, and providing training and PPE to people who *should be* regarded as key disaster management support personnel in the struggle against Covid-19.

We ran into another dead end with the Lunchbox Fund, also supported by the Solidarity Fund, which had spare allocation, but was denied permission to extend the reach of their original planned distribution. We shall continue to apply for food aid support for our partner communities wherever we see an opportunity. But we make no promises, we can only try. We appeal to our partners with a message that I shared with a failed funder: “*There is only one thing that is worse than having nothing, and that is having hope that is lost.*”

Challenges

The relationship between Civil Society Organisations and the Department of Human Settlements is complex, has a long history, and can best be described as dynamic. Finding synergy, in order to optimise our collective response to the pandemic, has given rise to a considerable amount of diversionary activity, at times unproductive use of time, and tension on three critical issues:

Facilitating CSO support and travel permits: Repeated reports have been tabled, both in the Human Settlements Task Team and the public domain, that the challenges in accessing travel permits is compromising the ability of CSOs to distribute food aid, and contributing to hunger. The Solidarity Fund will reach less than 10% of those who need food aid based on the Statistics SA. poverty index. As I write, I am

being flooded with queries by NGOs who are unable to carry out essential welfare and humanitarian work because they cannot access travel permits.

Evictions and demolitions: You cannot lockdown if you don't have a roof over your head. In spite of Minister Sisulu issuing a directive that there should be no evictions during this period, evictions and demolitions have been business as usual in Durban, parts of the Western Cape, and Johannesburg. It is exceedingly problematic when an issue that has been of long-standing controversy and debate between government and civil society, and is at the root of our long term approach to urbanisation, distracts us from focusing on a short term crisis of epic proportions. People are being brutalised, and social movements and NGOs who act as litigants have to continue to resort to the courts, while being asked to partner government in the fight against Covid-19.

Word games -- "De-densification" and Re-blocking: When the Department first hit media headlines in its response to the pandemic, Minister Sisulu announced a programme of "de-densification, in order to reduce overcrowding in informal settlements." Talk in the public domain quickly became of forced removals. While our NGO sector group acknowledged that the Department provided for community consultation, the Covid-19 response plan was principally directed at establishing Temporary Resettlement Areas (TRAs), which is what the Jika Joe prefab settlement was meant to be all those years ago....temporary. And they imply widespread displacement. The Department changed tack, saying it was just a matter of terminology and that de-densification and re-blocking are one and the same. We differ. Re-blocking is a process of micro-planning sections of a settlement layout in order to allow for the introduction of roads, water and sewer reticulation, that causes the least disruption to the social fabric of a community. Neither are quick processes that can address the urgent need to flatten the curve by, immediately, addressing public health water and sanitation issues, and food security on the ground.

As a sector, we are actively engaging in attempts to form a mutually acceptable Social Compact with the Department, including agreement to a clear, structured intervention with short, medium and long term objectives. We do this in the interests of the common good, no matter how frustrating the journey may be. The situation changes on a daily basis, making reporting very difficult. When we think we are establishing a rapport, there are reports of more evictions, meetings are cancelled without explanation, and the Department is now reported to be planning to use military veterans to relocate people as, clearly, the NGOs will not cooperate. We live in hope that we will enter a partnership on terms of equality and mutual respect, including the right to agree to disagree.

Keeping in touch

While the official announcement on the introduction of Level 4, and to which areas it will apply, will only be made on the evening of 30 April, indications are that eThekweni may remain at Level 5, but uMgungundlovu District (including Msunduzi) will drop to Level 4. Over the next week or so we shall have to consider the implications of the virus only peaking in September, as our work is rooted working with people in our townships and informal settlements, and social distancing will have profound consequences for where and how we interact on a routine basis.

In the meantime, the Human Settlements team is running and able to move around freely. A call has been made by one of our community partners for assistance with airtime. We do include this, as well as volunteer stipends, in applications for food aid assistance where the opportunity arises. However, BESG relies on external funding and we have no budget for these items. We could never have foreseen current events, that we would be so dependent on cellphone communication when people are not free to move around, and putting food on the table is more critical than buying airtime.

Khulekani and Nomtha will for the foreseeable future check in with all our community partners on a weekly basis. If you would like a field visit, please ask. If you see any activity by authorities please let us know. We are going to be submitting weekly reports to the National Task Team, and if services are not reaching you on the ground, they need to be told. If you have no airtime you can send one of our staff a free "Please call me" and they will get back to you within 24 hours.

Khulekani: 072 299 9150

Nomtha: 071 738 6554

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK NATIONAL HOTLINE:

0 800 029 999

08H00 - 16H00 (MONDAY - FRIDAY)

NATIONAL WATER & SANITATION

HOTLINE:

0800 200 200

ANNEX A:**MUNICIPAL WATER SERVICES RESPONSE EXERCISE 17 APRIL 2020**

Municipality	Number on website	Time of call on Friday, 17 April 2020	Outcome
Msunduzi	0800001868 0333923000	12h06 ,12h37 and 13h11 12h08 and 13h10	Number not working Number not working
Newcastle	0343287600	12h43 and 13h07	Number rings once and cuts off
eThekwini Metro	0803111111	12h09 to 12h24	Voice prompt kept announcing lines are busy – held the line for 15 minutes
King Cetshwayo District	0800203602	12h09 and 12h35	Number busy
uMgungundlovu District	0800864911	12h24	Call answered within seconds- operator takes complaint and promises to forward to water services
uMzinyathi District	0342191500	12h37 and 13h03	Rings but no answer
uGu District	0800092837	12h31	Call answered within seconds voice prompt directly to operator responsible for water complaints

National Department of Water and Sanitation Covid-19 Hotline 0800 200 200 – call answered after 13 minutes of holding, operator explains that they forward query for Dlamini Settlement, Dundee to National Command Centre which in turn liaises with the municipality and the process may take up to 3 days.

A call to the Hotline concerning the lack of standpipes at Mkondeni Sacca, Pietermaritzburg, resulted in workers coming to site within 48 hours to install 4 more.