



Op-Ed

Thursday, 26 March 2020

Civil Society calls for governmental and non-governmental actors to apply the “Leave No one Behind” principle when responding to COVID-19.

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared that an outbreak of the viral disease COVID-19 – first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China – had reached the level of a global pandemic.

We, as the South African Civil Society Working Group (SAWG) on SDGs, are particularly concerned about the vulnerability of poor and disadvantaged communities - who constitute the majority of our population - during this time. A large section of our society have compromised immune systems due to the prevalence HIV/AIDS and TB. Many people lack adequate water and sanitation facilities, live in crowded human settlements and rely on public transport systems. It is not hard to imagine that COVID-19 will be disastrous for our country once it hits these communities.

As witnessed in other countries hit by COVID-19, health systems are not prepared to respond to a pandemic of this magnitude. Our public health system is already working over capacity and is unlikely to cope with new cases every day. In addition, the unequal allocation of healthcare resources in South Africa would reduce the efficiency of any response to the crisis.

Experts warn that the consequences of inequality are deepened in societies affected by the virus, pushing many of the burdens onto the losers of today’s polarized economies and labour markets. They suggest that those in lower economic strata are more likely to catch the disease – and are more likely to die from it. And, even for those who remain healthy, the loss of income and access to non-COVID health care as a result of quarantines and other measures will have sweeping and disastrous consequences.

SWAG therefore calls for governmental and non-governmental actors to apply the “Leave No one Behind” principle in the response to COVID-19. We call for exhaustive interventions that are inclusive and that prioritise the needs of the poor and disadvantaged communities.

The recommendations by SAWG are therefore as follows:

1. Data-driven and targeted interventions are required to effectively respond to COVID-19. Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) must urgently release updated information and data on community vulnerability and the availability of services.

2. This must be recognised as primarily a health care crisis; the economic and social crises are secondary. Therefore, sufficient resources need to be allocated swiftly and urgently to increase the capacity of our healthcare system to contain the pandemic. Shortages of health facilities, testing capacity, essential supplies, and fully equipped hospital beds (ICU and ventilator) are being widely reported. We call for fair and equal allocation of all health facilities (public and private) to all people in South Africa.
3. As part of infection control and prevention strategy, hygiene practice will depend on access to safe water and sanitation facilities to reduce the transmission of the virus. However, in some communities there is acute lack of access to water and sanitation facilities. Government must work with Statistics South Africa to identify and target relevant communities.
4. Social distancing in crowded human settlements is impossible. Alternative accommodation must be sought for those individuals who need to self-isolate and quarantine.
5. Essential public services including the South African Social Assistance Agency and social services must be accessible during the crisis.
6. Law enforcement should forge relations with communities to apprehend opportunistic criminals who have victimised several innocent citizens under the guise of authorised community agents.
7. Regular and accurate information must be provided in all official languages through community radio stations, free to air television, and social platforms to reach the even the most remote communities.
8. The South African government has to consider a basic income grant to assist households to cope with the economic challenges brought by COVID-19. While we commend various interventions to alleviate the impact of economic crunch, government interventions must be exhaustive and prioritise the needs of the poorest of the poor.

-END-

ISSUED BY: AFRICAN MONITOR ON BEHALF OF **SOUTH AFRICAN WORKING GROUP**

For more information, contact **Yared Tsegay** on 072 208 4452 OR **Joyce Moholola** on 082 9749222 or email media@africanmonitor.org.

The South African Working Group comprises of the following organisations and institutions: