

A Programme of Action in the time of COVID-19

A call for social solidarity in South Africa

We, as civic organisations, trade unions, organisations of informal workers, faith-based organisations and community structures in South Africa, call on all people, every stakeholder and sector, to contain infection, reduce transmission and mitigate the social and political impacts of the COVID-19 virus.

Government retains a critical role in coordinating actions and distributing resources, yet its efforts will not be enough if we do not hold it to account and commit to a broad, bottom-up, public effort at this time. In a society as unequal as ours, we must work together to ensure that all safety measures are shared equitably.

We have a particular duty to safeguard those who are most vulnerable, those who are already living with hunger, weakened immune systems and poor access to health care. Greater restrictions and shutdowns are coming, but they will only work if full support is provided to working class and poor communities. Drastic measures are needed if we are to avoid disaster. Each of us must act now.

Acknowledging other statements coming from fellow movements and organisations, we put forward the following Programme of Action for all of us to work towards in the coming days.

1. Income security for all

In order for people to remain at home there must be income security for all. Employers must continue to pay salaries or grant sick leave while employees are restricted to their homes, and where continued salaries are impossible government must provide workers with income protection for wages lost during the pandemic. There must be a moratorium on retrenchments during this time. Self-employed, casual workers and those whose income is suspended at this time must be supported by government to prevent job-seeking movement and provide income security. The social grant system must be extended to ensure the direct transfer of cash to households during this precarious time. All defaults on mortgage and debt repayments during this time must be non-consequential. All evictions and removals must be banned. As Labour has proposed, a bold stimulus package will be required in the coming period. These measures must be developed in consultation with poor and working-class formations.

2. All households, residential institutions, the homeless and the informally housed must have easy access to sanitation, especially water and safe ablution facilities.

There must be an immediate opening of restricted water meters, mass-provision of safe water access points with unconstrained flow in areas where there is limited household access to water, and mass-distribution of safe ablution facilities to informal settlements. All of these sanitation points must have access to soap and/or sanitizer and information on the prevention of the virus.

3. All households, residential institutions, the homeless and the informally housed must have access to food

If we are to stay at home during this time, access to nutritious food is fundamental. The absence of the School Nutrition Programme is devastating. A coordinated and safe roll-out of food packages directly to distribution points in food-stressed neighbourhoods must be implemented. Failing that, the child support grant must be augmented. Support for locally-organised food systems must be strengthened.

4. Essential private facilities must be appropriated for public use to provide a unified and fair distribution of essential goods and services to all

National resources need to be focused and deployed in order to combat the epidemic. Essential services – health centres, food services, water and sanitation etc. – should be identified for urgent support and extension. This may require the conversion of factories and other places of production to produce sanitiser, protective clothing, water tanks, soap, food parcels, ventilators and other essential medical equipment. Essential private facilities must be made available for public use to provide a unified and fair distribution of essential goods and services to all. It requires that the public and private

health systems need to be regarded as one national health system and coordinated in the national and public interest, also through state appropriation if necessary, as Spain recently demonstrated. Finances may have to be mobilised through unconventional means such as compulsory national bonds or loans, reforms to tax structures and others. Exported food might need to be redistributed locally. Regulations on price hikes should be implemented.

5. Community self-organisation and local action is critical, as it our representation in national coordination

Civic organisations, community structures, trade unions and faith-based organisations will be extremely important in organising on the ground during this emergency. We must all take action where we are. Civic structures must be engaged, supported and given representation on the National Command Council. The distribution of reliable information, essential services and care for our people will require a massive coordinated effort from community leaders and structures. Volunteers must be trained and organised for safe, coordinated, campaigns at street-level and for those living in institutions. Middle-class and wealthy communities and organisations have an obligation to make resources available to poor and working-class communities.

6. Community Health Workers must be insourced trained and supported and, along with other frontline health and emergency services workers, must have access to the resources necessary to safely and effectively contain the virus

The 70 000 Community Health Workers are the outreach arms of our health. If they and other frontline health workers and emergency services workers are to provide the community services required during this time, they must all have access to reliable information, safety and protective gear, and the testing and other resources for effective containment of the virus.

7. We must identify strategies to calm tensions and divert violence in our homes

Home-based quarantine will escalate family and relationship tensions, and will likely lead to more violence against women, children and others most marginalized in our families and communities including LGBTI people and foreign nationals. We need to identify strategies to calm tensions and divert violence in our homes and communities over this time. We need a strong education campaign against all forms of violence, especially domestic violence. We need to strengthen safe responses from existing neighbourhood, regional and national organisations supporting women and children. This includes extending access to helplines for domestic violence, mental health, easing referral systems to shelters, and resourcing shelters to keep them open, functional and safe in the time of the virus.

8. Communication must be free, open and democratised

There must be an immediate distribution of free data to all, so that people are able to receive good information, contact loved ones during isolation and quarantine, and understand the measures that are in place to create safety. Access to the best international research should be free and public. There must be daily national press conferences from government leaders alongside scientists and professionals who can keep all of our people informed about the emerging situation.

9. The inequalities within our educational services need to be carefully considered, and mitigated, when moving to remote learning

Data and free website content must be made widely available to educational institutions for continued learning. However, there is massive inequality of access to resources such as computers, electricity, WiFi and learning space, as well difficult home situations that disproportionately affect poor and working-class learners, students and educators. The move to online learning should be made carefully, and as a temporary measure. We should not extend the inequalities in the education system by affording remote education to the few. Schools and universities should consider their collective role as community educators and developers facing an unprecedented shared experience. Schools, residences and dormitories should be understood as a public resource during this time, including for the safe distribution of food and other essential services interrupted by school closures.

10. We must prevent a nationalist, authoritarian and security-focused approach in containing the virus

We must guard against the easy deployment of military and police to create security in our communities. We must also prevent against creating scapegoats to blame for the current crisis. Instead we must ensure that care and resources are provided for the safety and protection of all who live in our country and in our communities.

How each of us responds to the COVID-19 pandemic will determine who we are as a society. The better we respond now, the better we will be after the pandemic. We must follow international best practice and the science that we have available to us to build an assertive response that works for the context of our own history and society. Our response must be just, equitable, and redistributive if we are to meet the needs of all our people. In times of physical distancing, social solidarity is key.

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(endorsements to date:)

South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU)
Assembly of the Unemployed
Fight Inequality Alliance South Africa
People's Health Movement South Africa
Support Programme for Industrial Innovation
Ndifuna Ukwazi
Equal Education
Medecins Sans Frontières
Denis Hurley Centre
Tshisimani Centre for Activist Education
African Water Commons Collective
Triangle Project
Popular Education Programme
Grace Family Church
Salt River Heritage Society
Sonke Gender Justice
Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT)
Economic Justice Network of FOCCISA
Initiative for Community Advancement
Tshwane Leadership Foundation
AIDS Foundation of South Africa
Refugee Social Services
New World Foundation
The Independent Producers Organisation
Documentary Filmmakers Association
Academics for Free Education
Workers World Media Collective
Bonteheuwel Development Forum
Middleberg Environmental Justice Network
Housing Assembly
HealthEnabled
South African Green Revolutionary Council
ActionAid South Africa

Centre for Applied Legal Studies
Sexual and Reproductive Justice Coalition
Khethimpilo AIDS Free Living
Active Citizens Movement
Gender Equity Unit, University of the Western Cape
Treatment Action Campaign
Social Justice Coalition
The Mbegu Platform
The Cooperative and Policy Alternative Centre
The South African Food Sovereignty Campaign
The Climate Justice Charter
Lawyers for Human Rights
Mining Affected Communities United in Action
South Africa Mining Affected Communities
360 Degrees Environmental Movement
Ashes to Purpose
Just Associates (JASS) Southern Africa
Sharp# movement for ecosocialism
One Voice for All Hawkers
Ithuba Lethu Recycling Cooperative
Community Healing Network
Public Services International
Institute for Economic Research on Innovation, Tshwane University of Technology
Keep Left
Makause Community Development Forum
Extinction Rebellion South Africa
Academic and Staff
African Centre for Biodiversity
Surplus People's Project
Open Secrets
Middleberg Environmental Justice Network
South African Green Revolutionary Council
Rural Health Advocacy Project
021 Cape Town
Bertha's Cape Town
Centre for Social Change, University of Johannesburg
Society Work and Politics Institute, University of the Witwatersrand
Heinrich Böll Foundation Cape Town Office
Gun Free South Africa
Southern African Faith Communities Environment Institute
Observatory Civic Association
Bench Marks Foundation
Centre for Faith and Community, University of Pretoria
Community Development Foundation, Western Cape
Marikana Youth Movement
Development Works Changemakers
Social Law Project, University of the Western Cape
Auwal Socio-economic Research Institute
Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation
Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Gauteng
The Interim People's Library
The Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU)
Rehana Khan Parker and Associates
Woza Women in Leadership
Treasured Gems Cancer Support
SA Lawyers for Change

Social Justice Advocacy Campaign
Public Affairs Research Institute
Community Development Foundation, Western Cape
South African Jews for a Just Peace
Westdene Sophiatown Residents Association
National Union of Care Workers of SA (NUCWOSA)
Amcare
Open Society Foundation South African
Civic Action for Public Participation
The Institute for the Healing of Memories
Inclusive and Affirming Ministries
Assitej South Africa
Liminability
Corruption Watch
Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising
SA Domestic Services and Allied Workers Union