

# Covid-19 reminds us to respect, admire, learn from social welfare organisations

By [Sameera Munshi](#)

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When Covid-19 first landed in South Africa, exposing the entire populace to the global pandemic, the social sector was amongst the first to be galvanised into action. By the time the call for physical distancing was made, these organisations, who are in the main non-profit organisations, had already thought of (and began implementing) solutions to continue their work under difficult conditions and tendered support to all spheres of government.



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When government declared a National State of Disaster, these organisations had already established networks of collaboration, response measures and appeals for support to address the social challenges that would inevitably present themselves in a national lockdown. The proactiveness from the social sector was due to their understanding of the crisis of inequality in South Africa, and the particular challenges facing South Africa's poor and most vulnerable populations.



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## Lockdown will exacerbate social issues

The sense of worry and concern among these organisations is evident for those in contact with social workers; community healthcare workers; auxiliary social workers; child welfare workers; carers to the aged, persons with disability and the sick; shelters for abused women and children and homeless; organisations supporting victims of gender based violence including LGBTIQ+ people; centres for drug abuse, and every other person working in the sector.

As the most unequal society in the world, South Africa has a unique, complex and structural battle for socio-economic reform at the best of times. Where more than 80% of our population is poor and vulnerable, the potential negative impact of the pandemic is deeply troubling. Unfortunately, the lockdown will exacerbate the social issues we face while also creating new problems, all of which must be addressed by the social sector.



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Some of the countless questions being asked by the sector include:

- How do people who rely on food security programmes access their meals in a safe manner, and without ‘gathering’?
- How do we protect homeless people?
- Do school feeding programmes (for numerous children the only source of nutritious food on a daily basis) continue to operate during the lockdown, and if so how?
- Do all households have access to safe drinking water and the means to practice basic hygiene?
- How do we support victims of gender-based violence, violence against children, and violence against LGBTIQ+ people in a lockdown; and will we have the capacity to respond to the expected increase in cases of abuse?
- How do rural communities access basic services when further restrictions limit the already strained public transport system?
- Will radio stations continue to operate?
- Where do we quarantine people who cannot self-isolate to contain the spread of the virus?
- Do our hospitals have the capacity to manage a pandemic?

The social sector is critical in responding to the crisis. They are part of the first responders to the pandemic and have grassroots reach that is critical at this time.



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If anything, the Covid-19 outbreak has shown the importance of the social sector. It has lobbied government, tabled relief measures for people in the informal sector, and increased their capability and capacity for more work. Simultaneously, it has been at the forefront of ensuring that proper occupational health and safety measures are in place for staff, and have navigated supply chains and alternative measures for transport during the lockdown. These are the organisations we need to respect, learn from and study as the economic and social climate gets tougher.

Non-profit, civil society and social sector organisations are critical to the cohesiveness and resilience of society in general. A crisis like this only makes that fact more stark. We need to find new ways to invest in their capacity and capability to allow them to sustainably continue to serve us in the future. The social sector truly is an “essential service” in every sense of the term. We must provide it with the support it needs, and deserves.

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