

Civil society groups that mobilized around COVID-19 face important choices

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Civil society groups have played an important role in responding to the COVID-19 social crisis in South Africa. Examples include the "community action networks" in [Cape Town](#) and [Gauteng](#), as well as

similar initiatives in more rural areas, such as the [Eastern Cape](#). They also include extraordinary crisis response efforts by pre-existing NGOs, such as [Boost Africa](#) and [Umgibe](#), and novel social innovations like [Food Flow](#).

This activism has played a substantial role in hunger relief. In the Western Cape, for example, the [Economic Development Partnership](#) estimates that such initiatives have contributed about half of all food aid in recent months. This is especially salient considering that the state has actually [decreased food distribution](#) during the COVID-19 crisis.

But as the crisis drags on and evolves, these activist groups are responding to growing and diversifying needs, just when access to resources is becoming more insecure for many of them.

Activists thus face some tough choices around how to keep going, what to focus on, and how to achieve longer-term impacts. We have been studying and participating in a variety of these social relief and innovation efforts, in order to collect and share their experiences. At this point in the evolving crisis, we seek to highlight the need for activists to carefully consider their strategic choices, so as to avoid some of their remarkable community activism from dissipating.

Stretched resources

Civil society activists have been responding to social and public health aspects of the pandemic for well over three months now. It is important to take stock of the resources they have been devoting to these efforts, and those that are needed for continued work.

Ensuring that food gets to those who need it and navigating tense community dynamics wrought by desperation is demanding and complex work. It is all the more tiring because many activists are volunteers –

[mostly women](#) – who juggle long hours of volunteering with other demands. These are remarkable efforts and many activists are exhausted.

Activists also carry heavy emotional burdens. They are directly confronted with the human suffering caused by hunger, disease and conflict. They receive calls from desperate mothers whose babies are dying. Many such calls cannot be responded to. This emotional cost contributes heavily to risks of activist burnout.

Finally, most activists have been relying on donations to obtain the food, sanitisers and other materials that they distribute. As the novelty of the crisis diminishes, there are signs that donations are diminishing, but the needs are not. In a recent survey by the Western Cape NGO-Government Food Relief Coordination Forum, about 90% of respondents highlighted that the need for food relief was growing, while 70% reported a decrease in available resources to meet this need.

Growing needs

The primary need that galvanized many [civil society groups](#) to action has been hunger. Initially, many activists had hoped that this would be mostly a short-term need brought about by the lockdown. But the desperate struggle for food is increasing in many communities.

And the need for food has also been joined by other important needs, including children's education and psycho-social requirements.

From the onset of the crisis, a big part of many civil society groups' response was to slow the spread of the coronavirus. But now activists are also responding to the growing disease burden, which may include establishing [community-based isolation areas](#), "[safe homes](#)" or fighting stigma associated with the virus.

In the context of these growing and diversifying needs, various choices will need to be made around what to focus attention on, both in the short term and the longer term. For some, even thinking about the longer term seems like a luxury, given the need to meet unrelenting day-to-day needs. Others emphasize the need to go beyond such immediate crisis relief to develop more systemic, longer-term interventions.

Longer-term, locally embedded strategies

Activists thus face the twin challenges of diminishing resources and proliferating community needs, as well as tensions between short- and longer-term interventions. These challenges and tensions may lead to the dissolution of some groups.

Groups that aim to sustain themselves and deepen their positive impacts will need to tackle these tensions head-on.

Importantly, there are no templates or "best practice" responses. Each activist group or initiative will need to negotiate its own responses to these tensions, taking into account their local context and priorities.

Nevertheless, exchanging experiences and strategies across initiatives can provide some ideas and inspiration.

For example, activists in the [Gugulethu community action network](#) have emphasized that the problem of hunger, while worsened by COVID-19, has always existed. They have thus developed a longer-term plan to enhance and maintain the many new community kitchens that have been set up, and to significantly expand community gardens to provide vegetables to these kitchens.

The longer-term vision is a network of local kitchens that are self-reliant, run by employees instead of unpaid volunteers. A strength of this plan is

its reliance on local resources and its focus on developing local supply chains, galvanized by local community organizing. Ensuring food relief (an immediate need) thus becomes a catalyst for local socio-economic development (a systemic change).

In [Muizenberg](#), activists discussed longer-term options with those who have been in need of support. One of the results is a local community kitchen run by volunteers from across the economic spectrum. It provides nutritious, high-quality [food](#) both to the needy and to those who can pay a donation to help maintain the enterprise. The community kitchen not only sustains the hunger relief effort (the immediate need), but builds vital bridges across different sections of the community (a systemic change).

Engaging the state

The magic juice in any such strategy is the local community organizing. The hope is that the civil society groups that have emerged to respond to COVID-19 can build longer-term momentum, expanding our ["imagination of what is possible."](#)

A second and related hope is that they can help build a more accountable and responsive state. While the groups have been able to provide some much-needed and well-targeted sustenance in vulnerable communities, the necessary longer-term and larger-scale interventions will benefit from the resources and mechanisms of the state.

The state's ability to respond to the problem of hunger has been very patchy. For years, activists have been pointing to this problem in their communities without a committed response from officials or politicians.

In that context, it's been encouraging to see that there have been positive coordination efforts between government leaders and civil society

groups, for instance in provincial forums in Gauteng and the Western Cape. Also, some civil servants have played [important roles](#) in participating in or supporting civil society efforts.

But other state representatives, such as some local councilors, have been remarkably absent in local community organizing. Some have even offered resistance, fearing a possible political force in the making.

Most activists we speak to have no ambition for political office and are at pains to emphasize this to preempt political resistance. Yet, it is possible that the civil society organizing in response to COVID-19 is bringing forth a new cadre of community leaders—a network of activists who will help keep the state accountable and engaged.

Silver lining in the epidemic

The scale and spread of civil society activism in response to COVID-19 has been remarkable. Some of these initiatives will likely dissipate as their resources are depleted and as the crisis evolves. But some will maintain their momentum and adapt to changing circumstances. The spirit of community organizing has strengthened and that is a silver lining among the dark clouds of our current times.

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