

## **Covid-19: The Second Big Shock for South Africa**

### **Towards a People's Response**

Climate Justice activists, championing a Climate Justice Charter for South Africa supported by children, students, faith based communities, the media, labour unions and community organisations, met in Johannesburg from the 16-17 March to deliberate on a people's response to the Covid-19 threat and the worsening climate crisis. We believe Covid-19 will certainly impact the working class, poor and vulnerable disproportionately. This is the same as climate injustice in which those least responsible bear the brunt. We are firm in the belief that addressing Covid-19 means also advancing climate justice. Those without water, food, housing, jobs and land, in precarious low income employment and, who are generally vulnerable, will be the victims of Covid-19 and worsening climate shocks (floods, heatwaves, droughts, tornadoes and sea level rise). We stand with them.

From 2014 South Africa had one of its worst droughts in history. In parts of the Eastern Cape this drought has not ended. This was a climate shock in which the ANC government failed to respond adequately to the needs of the working class, poor and vulnerable communities. The drought was only declared a national disaster in early 2018 after our food system collapsed, food prices increased and many vulnerable communities were impacted. Central to this experience was the lack of effective use of the Disaster Management Act and a blatant failure by the government to meet the water needs of numerous communities. This was a missed opportunity to ensure all South Africans had their water needs met sustainably, water regimes democratised, just water sharing established and the basis laid for grassroots food sovereignty pathways to feed communities, villages, towns and cities. In a heating world South Africa is going to experience more climate shocks and pandemics.

Covid-19 comes on the heels of the drought and is our second big shock. While we welcome the declaration of a national disaster by President Ramaphosa we remain concerned about his and relevant Ministerial pronouncements. South Africa had at least two months of lead time to prepare and plan for Covid-19 infections but instead we have talk of 'planning', 'preparing' and 'working together', despite the onset of transmission to local communities. The ANC government is reacting to the current trajectory of the virus rather than preparing the country for its anticipated spread. The following is not clear about the state response:

- A vulnerability assessment of the South African population and priority support strategies for the most vulnerable – the elderly, the young and those with compromised immune systems;
- The procedure for testing and free access for persons showing symptoms;
- The reorganising of the health care system such that public and private institutions are re-purposed (such as schools, military bases, faith spaces and universities) to provide separate, safe, quarantine spaces for treating infected patients and the vulnerable;
- Training and protection of health care workers;
- An inventory of respirators, ventilators and other crucial medical equipment, including possible sources of international support to meet gaps;
- How water stressed communities will be supported so they do not become Covid-19 hot spots;
- Ongoing learning and sharing with other countries.

## **We will all play our part but we call on:**

- Business to ensure workers are supported and protected. Workers must not be retrenched, must be paid if infected, must be given protective tools, guaranteed medical support and high corporate salaries must be cut to enable this. Big business to make a contribution to relief efforts, particularly to assist with funding of test kits and strengthening the capacity of public hospitals. We also support the call being made for cell phone providers to extend 3GB of free data a month immediately to all prepaid clients and basic contract users who currently have minimal or no data;
- Affluent society to stop panic hoarding and to actively display a 'duty of care' to ensure safety, wellbeing and sense of community. This also includes providing work security for their domestic workers. If they have boreholes, dams and other water sources, this is to be rationed and shared. Moreover, their individualised self-interest and competitive spirits must be informed by solidarity for those less fortunate;
- All in society to reject any form of xenophobia, racism and prejudice;
- Our faith based, cultural and sporting communities to play their part in stopping big gatherings. This must be done in the spirit of prioritising people's health over profits;
- Universities to be more sensitive to the plight of poor students receiving NSFAS funding, which has already covered accommodation costs. It is also necessary that students are not expected to vacate residencies, potentially spreading or contracting the virus in their hometowns. Such students to be allowed to use university residences, under public health guidelines, rather than sent home when universities shut down.
- Government to recognise that grassroots power and democratic citizens' rights are necessary to confront this challenge. Elite decision making processes in non-representative institutions such as NEDLAC, top down government leadership and authoritarian creep will not be acceptable. We must use this moment to ensure accountability and strengthen our democracy.
- Government and the private sector to crack down on corruption that takes away from meeting the needs of the people.
- Taxi owners and public transport operators to inform the public about Covid-19, issue government supplied masks and sanitisers to passengers and where possible encourage social distancing while in transit.

## **We stand for an ethics of care and solidarity as the basis to organise the following:**

- To co-host a day of solidarity action with drought affected and water stressed communities (54% of South African households do not have access to clean drinking water through a household tap) on 19 April, mainly in the Eastern Cape, with groups (under 100) at dams with low water levels. Such actions will be based on demands to meet the local water needs of such communities including washing their hands and ensuring personal hygiene given the threat of Covid-19 #SOS #WaterForAll;

- to rally and encourage climate justice organisations, in alliance with others, to build and support community responses to ensure communities are informed about Covid-19, protect the most vulnerable and democratise the role of local government;
- encourage partnerships with local government that meet the needs of communities.

### **South Africa Must ‘Lock In’ Important Systemic Transformations Now and After Covid-19 Peak Through a Macro-economic Stimulus Package.**

Covid-19 has arrived in the context of worsening climate and economic crises. While it takes up our attention as an immediate emergency it must be understood as an opportunity to build the socio-ecological systems that can sustain life and address all the crises we face. This means the Covid-19 effort must ensure South Africa can recover, protect its citizens and regenerate systems for the deep just transition. It must include some of the following:

- A substantive basic income grant for all;
- Fixing, cleaning, expanding and integrating our water systems to minimise water loss, ensure long term sustainability and affirm citizens’ rights to share in the water commons;
- The expansion, integration and improvement of the national health care system, community health care workers program and mobile clinics;
- Support community led food sovereignty pathways in villages, towns and cities, including supplying food parcels to Covid-19 patient homes, if needed;
- Climate jobs through eco-centric industrialisation and within our carbon budget to produce public transport vehicles such as clean energy high speed trains, buses, bicycles and renewable energy technology. Denel can be repurposed to lead such a process.
- Establish a democratic planning system;
- Reallocate finance to such a stimulus package from selling SAA and redirecting its staff to the expanding sectors through training and active labour market policies, recovered finance from looting, stopping all looting, a progressive carbon tax and a wealth tax.

### **Forward to the Climate Justice Charter**

In May we will finalise the climate justice charter for South Africa and take it to all parts of South African society for endorsements by individuals and organisations. We will seek to achieve a million or more endorsements. This process will be driven by actions involving students, youth, children and climate justice charter partner organisations.

We hope to take the charter to parliament on October 16<sup>th</sup>, a day of national climate justice action, to demand its adoption as per section 234 of the South African constitution. Partnering with local organisations, we will gridlock Cape Town from 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> October with a climate justice camp outside parliament and various non-violent mass tactics.

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