



Earth Day Message
Advancing Climate Justice and Food Sovereignty During Covid-19
A Response to President Ramaphosa's R500 billion Stimulus

22 April 2020

We celebrate Earth Day to remind us all that the more harm done to our life giving planet the more it will strike back. Disrespecting the delicate and beautiful web of life on planet earth has given us Covid-19 and the worsening climate crisis. Despite the tragic loss of life, Covid-19 has reinforced planetary awareness: we share a common problem, we have one home and one humanity. This breakthrough has not been made with the climate crisis. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic tornadoes have battered the US, wild fires are happening in parts of the Netherlands, massive flooding in Kenya, all reminding us that extreme weather climate shocks have not gone away. Yet the climate crisis, as an urgent and shared problem, which has to be dealt with now, is not part of our planetary consciousness.

While we all scramble to deal with a deadly virus in our midst, at 2°C, 3°C and 4°C degrees increases in planetary temperature we will be in the same position, except we will be dealing with intense heat everywhere, including collapsing food, water, health care and life giving support systems. Ironically, Covid-19 is helping to prevent this from happening. It has demonstrated the following:

- The fossil fuel industry is not more important than sustaining life. Hence oil demand has dropped, oil companies are going bankrupt and global carbon emissions are declining as a consequence;
- Governments can act to advance lifesaving emergency measures. Economic institutions can be repurposed, health care systems can be bolstered, social relief can be given and new economic ideas can flourish to bring benefits to all;
- Societies can rally human solidarity to sustain life, including building food sovereignty pathways and distribution systems to meet community need.

In this context, the struggle to overcome Covid-19 is also a struggle to intensify the climate justice and food sovereignty struggle to advance a deep just transition. The Cooperative and Policy Alternative Centre, a vibrant alliance partner of the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign, co-founded the Climate Justice Charter process a year ago. It has involved inputs from across society through roundtable dialogues, online engagements, activist think pieces and a national conference. We invite all in South Africa to work with us to finalise the draft climate justice charter by mid-May. We must not lose the opportunity Covid-19 gives us to lock in transformative systemic changes that will address both crises. Please go here

(<https://www.safsc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Climate-Justice-Charter-Draft1-2019.pdf>) to access the draft Charter and send us your input. Also engage with the online document here

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1uh3s7B8minK9a1oQ4hT8YO8GOzALlovH92BwGPwVRQw/edit?usp=sharing>

President Ramaphosa announced a historic R500 billion stimulus package last night. The government has deployed both monetary and fiscal policy measures to enhance socio-economic mitigation. We welcome this. However, it is important for us to keep the following in mind when making sense of this so we do not slip into a 'big man' or 'messiah' version of what's going on or worse, start licking the boots of the ruling party. We need perspective. First, the ANC government was given a monopoly on state power due to the nature of the pandemic and the lock down. Hence it has to lead the state, a weak and corrupt state that it has constructed through decades of reckless and self-serving leadership. Second, the draconian lock down of society and economy has had devastating consequences and necessitated a massive stimulus response, which places the economy on life support while strengthening socio-economic mitigation measures. Third, sensible governments the world over have also attempted to balance the public health response with extraordinary socio-economic mitigation measures, some even going as far as spending almost 20% of GDP, freezing rents and mortgage payments and introducing substantive cash transfers to citizens. Fourth, many voices across South African society have raised concerns with the inadequacies of the socio-economic measures of the first phase response of the ANC government, including the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign's concerns that the food pandemic will kill people first rather than Covid-19. The government had to respond.

The many details and aspects of the ANC government's stimulus package was not clear in the President's speech, reflecting a problematic approach to crisis management. We now have to follow every Minister to work out what this is all about. We strongly believe brush strokes and cursory overviews of what government is doing is not enough when major announcements are made. However, with what has been shared we are concerned about the following:

- Borrowing from international financial institutions must not lock in structural reforms that reinforce the power of finance over the South African economy;
- The ANC government has not built a welfare system, as per section 27 of the South African constitution. Instead we have a 'management system of the poor' through social grants to ensure desperation is disciplined. Social grant disbursements also reinforce a low wage economy at the heart of persistent inequality; it ostensibly deals with the 'poor problem'. The top ups on social grants announced fall short of meeting basic food needs of households. A current basket of essentials for a household of four costs R3408.
- A commitment to R350, for a social relief distress grant for the unemployed is inadequate to meet food needs. It locks the unemployed into a means tested process which is going to be a bureaucratic nightmare and will not be solved any time soon. Going forward we will continue to campaign with informal traders, unemployed peoples movements and children's organisations for a non-means tested basic income grant, including in six months' time when the government will stop such a benefit. We need a basic income grant now and to ensure we can handle the socio-ecological restructuring to deal with the climate crisis. We call on society to sign our peoples referendum for a #BIGNOW: <https://copac.org.za/peoples-referendum-bignow/>
- The food measures announced by the President do not inspire confidence. South Africa has about 30 million people in food stress. Distributing 250 000 food parcels over the next two weeks, through SASSA, the Solidarity Fund and other partners amounts to reaching 1 million people (assuming a household of 4). This is not enough. Moreover, SASSA's role in cash transfers and vouchers are very susceptible to corruption and political patronage. This must be done in a transparent manner. We reiterate our demands that the Solidarity Fund needs to work in active partnership with civil society,

local government has to be brought in to reach local communities and the armed forces (military, navy, air force and even the police and fire fighting services) need to be brought into the process to distribute food under the watchful eye of local community and faith based leaders. We also call on supermarkets to enable peoples pantries and solidarity buying <https://www.safsc.org.za/public-statement-demand-for-supermarket-chains-and-government-to-enable-peoples-pantries-and-solidarity-buying/> and <https://www.safsc.org.za/peoples-pantry-petition-and-call-for-solidarity-buying/>.

- Moreover, the President did not announce he was unlocking the food commons – micro-farmers, community gardeners, small scale farmers, subsistence fishers and school feeding schemes which are a crucial source of food in communities. We will continue campaigning for this to build community, village, town and city food sovereignty pathways in the midst of this crisis. We call on the public to assist the process by providing details about the food commons here <https://www.safsc.org.za/food-commons-map/>.
- The President's announcement of an additional R20 billion for water and sanitation infrastructure in local government is welcomed but there are gaps in water delivery on the ground. These resources have to reach communities in need. As it stands our online water stressed communities monitoring tool has 33 communities in urgent need of water and infrastructure support. See <https://www.safsc.org.za/water-stressed-communities-map/>

We do not agree with the State President and his government's vision of what kind of economy should come out of the Covid-19 pandemic. His dream of 20th century carbon centric industrialisation betrays his lack of an emancipatory ecological consciousness. He and his government are out of step with what the earth requires now. His Ministers have been giving licenses to mining companies, are allowing greater pollution from Sasol and ultimately are reinforcing a carbon based minerals-energy complex. This is the future we do not want coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic. In coming months, we will do the following to open up a different conversation in South Africa:

- Launch a popular education document on a climate science future for South Africa to inform the public on the dangers we face as Southern Africa heats faster than the rest of the continent;
- We will take steps to unite and consolidate the building of a Climate Justice Charter Movement;
- After we finalise the Climate Justice Charter for South Africa, we will, based on this peoples document, launch a Climate Justice Deal and Recovery Plan for South Africa.

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