



Press Release

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Poor Working Class Women are the Shock Absorbers of the Socio-Economic Crisis Accompanying Covid 19: Can We Dialogue, Solidarity Fund?

On Tuesday, 21 July, the seventh meeting of the National Food Crisis Forum (NFCF) was convened by the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign (SAFSC) and the Cooperative and Policy Alternative Center (COPAC), a vibrant alliance partner of the SAFSC and which is currently coordinating its response to Covid-19.

Covid 19 and A Worsening Socio Economic Crisis

Before Covid 19, we knew that South Africa was one of the most unequal countries in the world in income terms, with high levels of structural unemployment, a hunger crisis impacting at least 14 million people, with women mainly skipping meals and eating less to shield their families. We also estimated that at least 30 million people will be food stressed, under lock down due to these dynamics.

Our food relief mapping efforts have continued and we thank Seriti Institute, Foundation for Human Rights, Cooperative and Policy Alternative Centre and grassroots community organisations for supporting this initiative. Our food relief mapping exercise, which has received 385 responses thus far, confirms the importance of community led food relief efforts in mitigating the socio-economic crisis. They reach about 65 700 people per week, this costs about R6 005 648; 25% of these initiatives distribute food daily and 30.4% provide food to over 500 people. Government and the Solidarity Fund are absent in this context. Communities are mobilising local resources to make this happen but constraints are building up.

The above realities were underlined by the main findings of the *National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey*, by Dr Nic Spaull (lead investigator) and his colleague Dr Gabrielle Wills who presented the key findings to the NFCF.

The results from this study affirm that poor working class women are the shock absorbers of this crisis:

- Of the 3 million jobs lost since February, 2 million were women;
- Most of the job loss impacts have been in low skill categories;
- Yet most of the Covid relief grants have gone to men;
- In grant receiving households, 42% lost additional income due to job losses and this has impacted on food stress;
- Food poverty has worsened such that in April 47% of households ran out of income to buy food;
- Child hunger has worsened with 15% reporting hunger in the last 7 days;
- Many women continue to shield their children from hunger as they skip meals;
- NGOs and neighbours have made a greater difference than government in terms of social relief to households.

Local food relief efforts, supporting the commons and local food production are central to a national response to the worsening hunger crisis. All of these elements are connected and have to be supported now.

Our Second Public Call to The Solidarity Fund to Dialogue

We applaud the court victory by *Equal Education* to secure the reinstatement of school feeding schemes for about 9.6 million children. We would add the proviso that nutrition considerations must inform these schemes. Moreover, this judgement comes in the wake of other victories to open the food commons in South Africa such as for informal traders and subsistence fishers, in which the NCF has been involved. However, the moment requires government, the Solidarity Fund and civil society organisations to dialogue and work on people led solutions for resolving the worsening food and social crisis. It is worrying and unacceptable that we have not been able to have an integrated and comprehensive response as a country to the worsening food crisis. The NCF was formed to forge a national public-commons partnership and we have been reaching out consistently to share ideas, support grassroots communities and build consensus on a national response to the worsening food crisis.

Underlying this is one of the worst droughts in the history of the country. In March this year, Minister Zuma declared the drought a disaster in early March, under the Disaster Management Act, and provided for special relief measures to be taken. It is not clear who benefitted from the relief measures. On the 4th of July this declaration was set aside, in a context in which dam levels have not fully recovered in most parts of the country. Commercial farmers in the Eastern Cape are struggling to deal with devastating impacts of the drought and small scale farmers don't feature in government's approach to ensuring adequate food production. South Africa's food value chains face a serious threat from the drought and the challenges it has brought to commercial farmers. South Africa cannot be blind to these realities and the need to think about diversified food production strategies in the context of Covid 19.

Hence it is disappointing that the Solidarity Fund has not committed to an in-depth engagement with the NCF on the following issues:

- The Solidarity Fund's plans to address the worsening food crisis;
- A public-commons partnership including addressing the needs of water stressed communities;
- An integrated and comprehensive food crisis response including a national food sovereignty strategy for communities, villages, towns and cities to feed themselves;
- Participation in a community food relief assembly to receive mapping data which the Fund can utilise in its strategic planning;
- Talking to supermarkets together. Many supermarket chains have given funding to the Solidarity Fund, while they continue to profiteer by pushing up food prices including for essentials. We need to ensure supermarkets provide for ethical pricing of essential solidarity packages, peoples pantries and community led food distribution of such solidarity packages;
- Deliberate on the importance of a basic income grant for South Africa and the #UBIGNOW consensus as a solution to the worsening socio-economic crisis. In this regard we extend an invitation to the Fund to attend a webinar with one of the world's leading thinkers on this proposal, Prof Guy Standing. Details available at <https://copac.org.za/upcoming-events/>.

We are simply asking the Solidarity Fund to think and work with us so establish a common national response to the worsening hunger and socio-economic crisis. The 385 organisations involved in our food relief mapping effort and the 110 organisations that have endorsed the NCF strategy are ready to talk.

Water is a Constitutional Right

We applaud the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) for taking forward our partnership through tabling our three water stressed community reports, involving 79 communities, with the Deputy Minister of Water Affairs and the Minister of COGTA. The outcomes from these engagements will be monitored closely. Government has not been responsive and communities need urgent relief. In this context we also reserve our right to take legal action against the Minister of Water Affairs and Sanitation to ensure water needs of communities are met.

We will continue working with the SAHRC to ensure the water crisis in South Africa is taken seriously during Covid 19 and we address the glaring state failures impacting negatively on community water needs.

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