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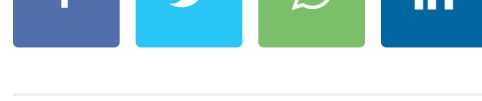
OPINION

How to feed thousands

Alison Misselhorn 12 Sep 2020



Although the government's vaccination drive is already in full swing, there have been no announced plans for the vaccination of homeless people, despite the public health risk if they are left out. (Darren Stewart/Gallo Images)



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The majority of South Africans live on the edge of hunger and poverty. The effects of lockdown in response to Covid-19 exposed the precarious nature of livelihoods in South Africa. Unemployment prior to lockdown was already over 27%. When non-essential services shut down, millions more jobs were lost or frozen. As poverty escalated, so did food prices — further deepening food insecurity.

The hard lockdown on March 27 meant schools closed. Unemployment coincided with daily school nutrition no longer being available to the 9-million vulnerable children in primary and secondary schools who rely on the National School Nutrition Programme for daily sustenance. Similarly, for 2.7-million pre-school children in out-of-home early childhood development (ECD) facilities and playgroups which depend on funded breakfast and/or lunch programmes. In the ECD sector, these are either through the department of social development's partial care grant, or through the support of non-governmental or non-profit organisations.

South Africa's policy responses in terms of emergency social protection reforms were announced in two stages on March 25 and April 21. These included: contribution-financed social insurance to millions who had been in formal employment, the expansion of the unemployment insurance system, supplements to existing social grants as well as a new emergency grant. The policy reforms were unprecedented and bold, but their deployment inevitably took time. It should be noted that many also fall through these safety nets. Access to social protection is shaped by factors such as means testing, citizenship, physical health and knowledge, and geographic location. The uneducated, elderly and foreign nationals are difficult to reach.

From thousands to hundreds of thousands

The agility and willingness needed for a rapid and immediate response to the food crisis came from civil society. The Lunchbox Fund (LBF), where I work, was one of many organisations that stepped in within the first weeks to assist thousands of families in need. Prior to lockdown, the Lunchbox Fund was already providing a fortified meal to 30 000 children each school day nationally. It pivoted its school nutrition programme to relief feeding, and has distributed over 685 000 emergency family food parcels nationally since April.

The Lunchbox Fund knew it would be necessary to develop a strategy on-the-wing, and without cumbersome and costly infrastructural and institutional overheads. They were in a unique position as their existing national food supply-chain protocols and logistics could be quickly adapted, and they had existing, in-depth knowledge of food provision through their school nutrition programming. Partnerships with the Solidarity Fund and the HCI Foundation/eNCA Covid-19 Relief Fund provided essential funding impetus, and encouraged private donors and trusts to contribute directly into LBF's dedicated Covid-19 relief fund.

Together with Sizani Foods, LBF designed a relief food box generous in content. Each box was small enough to be carried by one person, while also meeting essential family nutrition needs; providing a guaranteed meal a day to a family of four for one month. Sizani commissioned additional warehouse, hired staff and started procurement to accommodate the packing required — all within a nationwide lockdown with the attendant industry closures.

Grassroots essentials

None of the relief food provision could have been achieved, however, without LBF's partnership with 100s of grassroots organisations across the country. LBF delivered to on-the-ground education partners, non-profits and community-based organisations, who in turn undertook micro-distribution directly to families. Every organisation was contacted by LBF to determine the needs in their community and their capacity to deliver the parcels directly to the most needy.

A powerful civil society network was activated. These organisations were able to rapidly identify and reach the neediest in their communities because of their daily work at the coalface of chronic vulnerability and poverty. Food relief was deployed rapidly — reaching the most forgotten urban and rural families and the most remote communities.

Relief food deliveries were made through LBF's existing national logistics partner, Value — building on the same distribution protocols in place for school nutrition. Relief food boxes went directly from their supplier in Johannesburg to each organisation's door, with on-the-ground signing protocols and cloud-based tracking.

Lockdown regulations and safety protocols had to be adhered to, and each organisation was sent the necessary level one permits and protocols with their delivery. With the history of relief feeding littered with food that has gone astray, every benefiting family completed a trackable recipient register which organisations returned to LBF, together with photographs of distribution efforts.

What has been learned?

The degree of traction that South African civil society has in addressing acute and chronic vulnerabilities is considerable. The response across a network of organisations was nimble and penetrating, attesting to the deep concern civil society organisations have for the communities in which they work, their hands-on knowledge, and their existing relationships with the most vulnerable.

On receiving the food parcels, the Ratanang organisation in KwaZulu-Natal's Umkhanyakude district messaged LBF to say: "These parcels have had a great and positive impact on the poor and vulnerable families as we are staying in a deep rural area where there is a high percentage of people who have low levels of education and are not employed. Starvation is high and some even cried when they received the parcels, thanking God for the food."

South Africans are at their best when things are tough: multiple role-players stepped in without hesitation to help and people went above and beyond. Emergency food provision was achieved simply and effectively — together.

Although humanitarian responses to the hunger crisis are essential, the underlying chronic vulnerability that has been so starkly exposed in the past months should never be forgotten. The need for school nutrition will be greater than ever before in the wake of Covid-19. Child hunger has worsened, and a hungry child cannot learn. Parallel investment in child education and in-school nutrition are investments in the foundations of individual and community resilience in the face of an unknowable future.

Dr Alison Misselhorn is director of research and strategy at the Lunchbox Fund. She has worked since 1995 in the related fields of vulnerability, food security and sustainable livelihoods — through applied science and hands-on development work. She holds a PhD in food security from the University of the Witwatersrand.

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