



# **A COVID-19 MOMENT TO INTROSPECT AND REFLECT FOR CHANGE**

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In the late 1990s, transformation turned out to be the expression used by government and civil society organizations to describe the direction of change in South Africa.

With the dawn of a new century - 2020 characterized by the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa (SA) finds itself within an emerging, rapidly evolving situation. Like many other countries, it is faced with unprecedented health, economic and development disruptions that are fundamentally changing the world we live in.

### Projections

What the future trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic will be like, how this will reshape economies, health and development priorities, we can only speculate based on current projections at our disposal.

Apart from the [South African COVID-19 Modelling Consortium](#), a number of other models that make projections do reference information about this pandemic. A group called Pandemic Data Analysis estimates only Twenty Thousand (20 000) deaths with 'a sense that we might bring it down or decide that it is the top of our range'. But then, the Actuarial Society of South Africa ([ASSA](#)) warned that as many as Forty-Eight Thousand (48 000) people may die of COVID-19 in the next four months if 'government does not maintain a strict approach to flattening the curve'. Other sources such as the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) situation report and Worldometer provides an indication of the number of infections and deaths.

### Critical concern

South Africa has arguably the highest Gini coefficient in the world. With challenges to economic growth, the incidence of HIV/Aids, gender-based violence, poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, and homelessness. Of the roughly 7.7 million people living with HIV, 2.5 million are not currently on antiretroviral treatment.

While the primary threat posed by COVID-19 is to people's physical health, the pandemic is also taking its toll on socio-economic wellbeing, cultural activities, and people's mental

health. COVID-19 has forced people to adjust to a different way of life which has caused much stress for the broader population.

According to a clinical psychologist, people are likely to experience intense feelings of depression. That there is also a whole hidden epidemic around gender-based violence and challenges around people living with disability.

Statistics rate unemployment to be as high as 29% in this country, with the youth making up a telling number. With the South African economic outlook downgraded below investment grade, the negative impact of the pandemic on the economy and the labour market will undoubtedly continue for some time. Economist also warns that there is also a danger that employment losses due to the Covid-19 epidemic will become permanent, causing the rate of unemployment to be significantly raised for years to come.

### Intervention

Government committed to a number of policy programmes, ranging from [Reconstruction Development Programme](#) (RDP) to [National Development Plan](#) (NDP). The intent is to address the many social and economic challenges - such as education, health care, lack of jobs, and a failing economy.

In response to COVID-19 pandemic, the government employed a number of preemptive steps to mitigate perceived challenges. The [Presidential Coordinating Council](#) (PCC) along with other committees was set up to align responses to the pandemic. In his televised address to the nation, President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a national state of disaster which in terms of the [National Disaster Management Act](#) enabled government to institute a range of measures that can include limiting some constitutionally enshrined rights, but also and importantly so allow for additional funds to both curtail the spread and mitigate the mass disruption of the pandemic.

The first phase entailed placing the country on lockdown in March 2020. In support to this, a number of organizations in business, the health sector, social services, and

protection services provided frontline services in the quest to mitigate the spread of the virus, saving lives and 'flattening the curve'.

The second phase of the government's economic response to the outbreak includes a "massive social relief and economic support package of R500bn". He also introduced a six-month coronavirus grant to reach the most "vulnerable families". An increase in the existing social grant for this period and allowing unemployed persons to access a Three Hundred and Fifty Rand (R350) Social Relief of Distress grant over the next six months.

The Minister for Social Development, Lindiwe Zulu announced that "Our efforts will be directed at ensuring that we protect the most vulnerable who will continue to require our services at this difficult time." There is no doubt that the spread of COVID-19 will worsen, and it is likely to increase the demand for social services in the form of social grants, Social Relief of Distress, food relief and psychosocial services for affected individuals and families.

There is a need to mobilize a shared culture in dealing with the key challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality as outlined by the National Development Plan (NDP).

The majority of vulnerable people do not live in formal housing, but in incredibly close quarters, with shared toilets and limited access to water. It is imperative that affected communities should be prioritized to ensure all efforts in creating the necessary economic and social condition for sustainable development.

### Amidst the pandemic

It is worth noting that the pandemic will only end when a vaccine has been developed, and while this is happening, the economy will continue to take a huge strain, recovery will be a long protracted process.

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As lockdown measures are being eased off, the use of face masks may well be an important component of interventions. Social distancing may also act as a symbol of hope, shared responsibility and collective action to a life-altering pandemic.

How life will be different once the pandemic has passed is not clear. For now, this is our 'new normal' and we've got to transform to retain some semblance of social life.

SOURCES: available on request