



19 March 2020

OXFAM SOUTH AFRICA STATEMENT OF SOLIDARITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CORONA VIRUS PANDEMIC

Dear friends and colleagues

The Corona Virus Pandemic is indiscriminately disrupting lives across our world, leaving a trail of destruction in its path. To date, almost 200 000 people have been infected in more than 155 countries, with nearly 8 000 deaths recorded worldwide. On 15th of March, the South African president declared a National Disaster and cases are now sitting at 150 infections, in just a few days since the first case was announced. The reality that this will spread even further requires all of us to act decisively, leading everywhere we are and supporting progressive national and international efforts. Despite this harsh reality, we are not powerless. Every household, community, place of worship, school, workplace and mode of transportation is as much a potential site of transmission as it is a site of prevention.

Oxfam South Africa supports measures recommended by the government as expressed in the President's speech of March 15th. Countries across the world are stepping up to the moment, showing leadership through a broad range of public health focused as well as macroeconomic policies aimed at rescuing the economy and society from the abyss. For example, The Central Bank of Nigeria has created a credit facility to the order of USD 136 million that will be channelled towards households, small and medium-sized enterprises, airline service providers, hotels and health care merchants. The bank has also slashed interest rates by 400 basis points from 9 to 5 percent. We encourage the South African government to consider what similar measures would be applicable for a national response that matches the scale of unfolding impacts.

As part of our own contribution, we will be launching the following initiatives:

- ***Contributing to civil society mobilisation for decisive action that prioritise the impact on and needs of the most vulnerable*** including low-paid workers, the elderly and indigent.
- ***Partnering with Municipal government entities and communities*** where we have existing partnerships to contribute to local-level initiatives
- ***Investing in public health education efforts***, to be delivered together with partners and communities, targeting some of the most vulnerable areas of our society.

- Exploring appropriate **humanitarian interventions in co-ordination with community-based partners and humanitarian agencies.**
- **Supporting regional collaboration and co-ordination.** Whilst understanding decisions by governments to close borders, we know the disease will not respect those borders. Our best lessons in managing epidemics show us that risks and impacts transcend borders. Hence, trans-national collaboration and co-ordination of efforts is a better approach.

Safeguarding the most vulnerable and contending with inequality

Whilst some countries have higher numbers of infected and sick people than others, there will be differential impacts on individuals and nations in a world of grave inequalities between and within nations. We know that capacity to respond and care for the sick within and between nations is unequal, whilst political will by governments to take decisive steps will ensure nations cope or cave. In South Africa, our fragmented and highly inequitable health system will hamper the country's ability to respond effectively to this pandemic. Currently, our country spends a total of 8.7% of GDP on both public and private health care. The private sector absorbs the equivalent of 4.5% of GDP on health for 16% of the population, whilst the public sector spends 4.2% of GDP on health for other 84% of the population. Only 10% of South Africans can afford what is being charged by private health care. This is the moment to test the principle of pooling resources for greater equity between the private and public health systems as proposed through the National Health Insurance Scheme.

This moment is also an opportunity for government to reverse the chronic under provisioning and budget cuts which are bringing the public health system to its knees. While the average growth in healthcare expenditure was 7 percent between 2001-2011, it has drastically declined since 2012 and is set to decline over the next three years. These numbers show up in unfilled vacancies in the public healthcare sector, the decreasing numbers of healthcare worker per populations size which at national level averages 1 nurse caring for 202 people. In the most affected provinces, the nurse to population ratio is one nurse for 160 people in KZN, one nurse for 199 people in Gauteng, one nurse for 205 people in the W.C. Yet, the opposite is true in the private health care sector. The number of beds servicing a population of 1000 people in the private sector at the national level is double that in the public sector. In provinces like Gauteng and Western Cape, it's as high as five times than the national private sector average.

Containing the pandemic is of utmost importance for saving lives. The world, and South Africa in particular, have learnt critical lessons about the need for holistic responses in managing pandemics. Even as the dynamics of transmission of the Corona virus vary, there are big lessons we should draw on, such as ensuring that care and support is the primary approach we use to ensure people feel comfortable seeking help quickly and behavior change approaches do not stigmatise. Unequal access to timeous testing and quality health care for the infected will undermine every other aspect of the response. In addition, containment must include putting

safety nets in place that don't leave the most vulnerable amongst us, including low-paid workers, exposed.

This virus hits our nations at a time where the underpaid or unpaid social burden of care on women is increasing. Austerity measures which see the states back-peddling on strengthening essential services provisioning cannot make this pandemic a burden of women. The required prevention measures include heavy reliance on water. The ongoing water crisis in parts of South Africa places a huge burden on women which this pandemic will worsen especially in peri-urban and rural areas. In addition, women play a significant role in home-based care for the sick and indigent. Extra care and checking in on the elderly and indigent become critical with the corona virus. Enhanced protection for these home-based carers, ensuring that we do not render them volunteer front-liners of the social response, to the detriment of their own health.

Across the world, we are seeing a tip of the iceberg in terms of the Corona pandemic's economic. As more people are unable to work due to sickness, or isolation due to fear of infection, firms will be unable to fill orders on the supply side. On the demand side, the losses of income to workers means less demand for goods and services produced by major companies, small businesses and informal workers alike. Self-employed people and small businesses who are key to our economies as much as big corporations will be hardest hit. Small and medium size businesses employ significant numbers of people and will buckle under the weight of this economic impact.

We support the call by workers, including domestic workers and informal workers whom "no work no pay" renders instantly destitute, for employers and the government to do what they can to pay workers regardless of whether they can come to work or not. In an economic climate as stressed as the South African one, this requires decisive leadership from the government in co-operation with private sector actors, worker formations and other civil society actors to design measures to cushion the most vulnerable from the potentially devastating social and economic impacts of this pandemic. Even the International Monetary Fund, an institution implicated in some of the back-peddling on social provisioning which have weakened capacity of our public health systems, has called upon governments to "implement substantial targeted fiscal, monetary and financial market measures to help affected households and businesses".

We commend civil society formations who have launched actions to assist. We must build on this momentum to mobilise enhanced actions in communities, building circles of support and solidarity that leave no one not knowing what to do or feeling alone and abandoned. Globally civil society and individuals are coming together to plan actions to ensure that nations respond in a manner that is accountable to the needs and impacts on the most vulnerable. We cannot allow social and economic inequalities to doom those on the sharp end of inequality to death or deprivation due to lack of food and essential medicines.

We deeply appreciate messages of support and solidarity that have come from friends and partners across our African continent. This is the kind of people to people solidarity we must build on, and which as South African people we owe our fellow Africans.

Our governments and medical bodies across regions and our continent must collaborate as closely as possible, sharing lessons and supporting research and development to make accessible preventative and curative technological interventions. We must learn from this pandemic, about preparedness for an uncertain future where pandemics like this will become the norm. With decisive leadership, accountability, compassion and solidarity, we will overcome this and help the healing of wounds for the families who have lost loved ones.

We commend our health workers and first responders across the world who have stepped in and are giving hope and saving lives!

For specific information and assistance:

In South Africa: www.sacoronavirus.co.za/ Emergency Hotline: 0800 029 999/ WhatsApp support line: 0600 123456

Other places to get information internationally - World Health Organisation (WHO):

<https://www.who.int>

To contact Oxfam South Africa at this time (Please note we are currently working remotely):

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