



CITY OF CAPE TOWN



An all-of-society approach to the COVID-19 food crisis

On 26 March 2020, South Africa entered a hard COVID-19-related lockdown that resulted in the closure of national government food relief distribution channels, exacerbating the Western Cape's chronic food insecurity problem. In response, the provincial government, local government, civil society, individuals and the private sector came together and mobilised their resources. This story highlights how an all-of-society approach came into action in the Cape Town city-region, and how the food crisis became an opportunity for social, organisational and technological innovation.



OVERVIEW

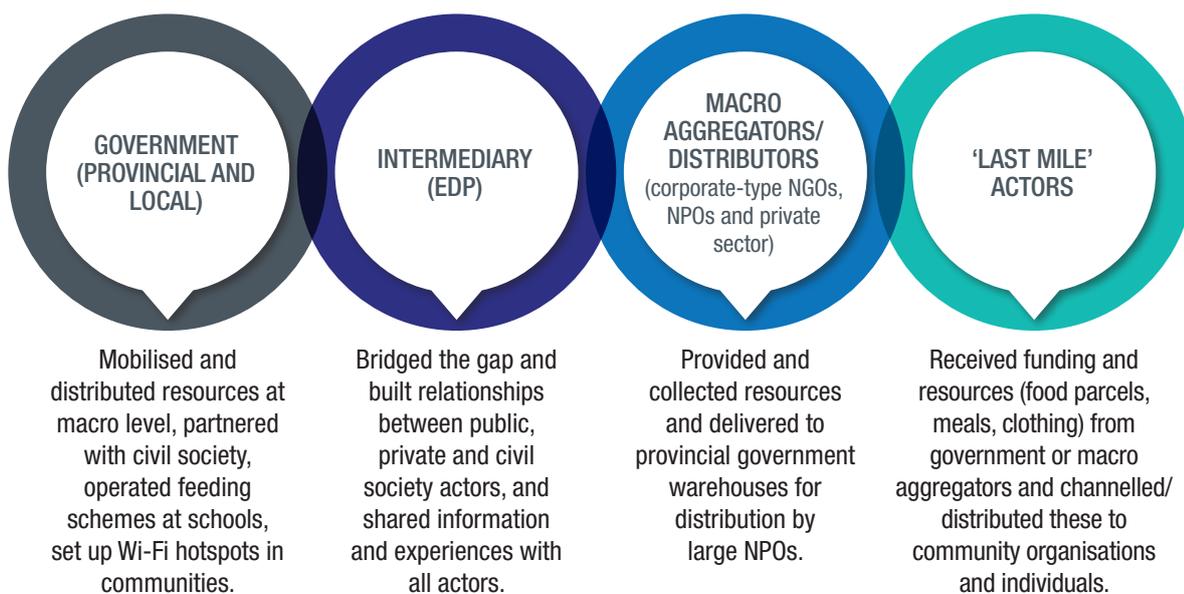
The national hard lockdown had an immediate and severe impact on the livelihoods of poor communities. Overnight, informal activities ceased and formal businesses stopped trading. At the same time, the national food relief system was shut down, as it was not designed to accommodate an unforeseen event such as the COVID-19 pandemic, with its hygiene and social distancing requirements. Many food relief channels were suspended or reduced, including the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) and Community Nutrition and Development Centres (CNDs). But as national relief channels closed, the demand for food spiked, exacerbating the existing food insecurity problem in the Western Cape. Although national government introduced various measures to alleviate socioeconomic hardships, their implementation was delayed. To fill the food gap, civil society, government and the private sector took action, leading to the organic emergence of an all-of-society approach to address the food crisis.



An all-of-society approach to the food crisis

The first responder was civil society, which marshalled resources and established food distribution networks. Community Action Networks (CANs) sprang up organically to address immediate community needs. Cape Town Together (CTT), a self-organised volunteer network, formed to connect the CANs and individuals in communities in the Cape Town metropole. On 30 March 2020, the Economic Development Partnership (EDP), an intermediary organisation, convened an online session between CAN representatives and the Premier of the Western Cape, at which parties agreed to work together to coordinate food-relief efforts. Subsequently, the Food Relief Forum (FRF) was established as a government-led mechanism for coordinating resources and mobilising actors. On 23 April 2020, the FRF held its inaugural meeting, which was attended by CANs, the City of Cape Town (COCT) and the Western Cape government (WCG). By mid-May 2020, the Forum was fully operational, providing meals and distributing food parcels with the support of macro-level aggregators such as the Solidarity Fund, a national initiative which worked with two logistics companies to source, pack and deliver food to local organisations, and private corporations which were actively involved in providing food parcels or making donations to intermediary organisations for distribution to grassroots ‘last mile’ structures.

FOOD NETWORK ACTORS



Towards a long-term strategy to addressing food insecurity

From July 2020, the FRF noticed a decline in the need for emergency food relief. As the country entered partial lockdown, national food relief programmes started operating again, and emergency grants were reaching recipients. By October 2020, the FRF mandate had changed, shifting to balancing short-term interventions and long-term strategies in the food system. The FRF's work led to the establishment of the Western Cape Food Systems Working Group, a transversal, multi-sectoral forum that explores ways of addressing food insecurity through evidence-based, coordinated learning and action.





Intermediaries can foster mutual understanding, trust and accountability

The EDP played a crucial role in bringing together public, private and civil society actors throughout the food crisis. It convened and facilitated the non-governmental organisation (NGO) WCG Food Relief Coordination Forum, participated in intergovernmental committees and dialogues and was key to unlocking the catalytic role played by civil society in marshalling resources from diverse groups and establishing food distribution networks. This illustrates the value of intermediary organisations and how they can contribute to collaboration by bringing actors together and helping build relationships based on mutual respect and trust. Intermediaries ‘bridge the gap’, encouraging partners to work across siloes and beyond institutional mandates; keeping communication channels open and active; ensuring that information and experiences are shared; and mediating conflict situations. They can also connect two different systems in a way that allows them to co-exist and complement each other: bureaucratic, hierarchical government (providing on the ground insights) and flexible, informal NGOs and community organisations (helping to better understand and navigate the government system and overcome any related challenges).

State capability as key to addressing food insecurity at scale

The WCG stepped in as the most active public sector actor in providing food relief. This was followed by local municipalities with actions that cut across the food relief system, including: mobilising and distributing resources at the macro level; working with large aggregators delivering supplies to provincial warehouses; partnering with civil society in communities that operated kitchens or provided parcels; operating feeding schemes at schools; and setting up Wi-Fi hotspots in communities. However, despite this herculean effort in partnership with civil society, provincial government and municipalities distributed only a fraction of food compared to national government’s food relief programmes under normal pre-COVID circumstances. This shows that there is no substitute for national government’s food relief programmes, as implementing feeding programmes at scale requires the national state’s capacity. However, the Cape Town experience shows that other spheres of government and the private sector have an important role to play in the effective roll-out of food interventions.

The importance of intergovernmental collaboration

The provincial government played a key role in driving the Western Cape food relief network, partly building on its experience in distributing food aid. While local government also stepped in, their involvement in food security has been minimal because of mandate issues. However, the involvement of municipalities in food security is crucial because, unlike other spheres of government, they have comprehensive local insight and are caretakers of the resources necessary to empower food security among communities. Newly created structures such as an internal government planning committee, which include the COCT, municipal districts, seven provincial departments, and the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) represent examples of organisational innovation and mechanisms for the creation of a food relief system that is anchored in collaboration across governmental spheres. Going forward, it will be key for the national government to work with these food networks, and for parties to re-imagine a new food relief system that draws on the reach and scale of the state apparatus, but uses the network governance model that evolved in the Western Cape.

Building on innovative practices to advance local economic development

The COVID-19 experience revealed structural flaws in South Africa's food system and was the impetus for developing innovative practices to address food insecurity. The FRF found that food parcels do serve a purpose under certain conditions. However, they are not an optimal food-relief solution, due to numerous composition and distribution challenges, and are not a sustainable means of addressing food insecurity in communities. Alternative practices introduced include digital vouchers for community kitchens that could be used to purchase food and (later) electricity and data, rolling out Wi-Fi hotspots and encouraging communities and community practitioners to harness their agency to find solutions. Building on these innovative practices does not just allow for a more sustainable approach to addressing food insecurity, but also represents an opportunity to develop local township economies in ways that harness and contribute to social, cultural and organisational capital and cohesion, and crowding resources into communities.

The importance of an inclusionary approach to informality

Informal socioeconomic activities are central to township economies and meeting the needs of vulnerable communities. However, these contributions are not sufficiently understood. As a result, the compliance-based public sector regulatory environment is ill-equipped to direct public resources to informal and unregistered entities, which means that its interventions are often unable to reach the people being targeted. Important opportunities exist for civil society to work with government, bridging the gap between the public and informal sector. For instance, CANs in Cape Town facilitated a buddy system that enabled informal, unregistered CBOs to link with formalised and registered NGOs. Central to exploring long-term opportunities and partnerships, which build on this inclusionary approach to informality, is a better understanding of the workings of the informal sector on the part of the public sector. This will require understanding the risk-reward relationship associated with allocating resources and, in turn, the development of tools that measure intangible assets and the opportunity costs of no action.

An adaptive approach to cooperative governance and decision-making

The FRF illustrates how a cooperative governance network model works in practice based on an all-of-society approach to collaboration. Central to this approach is recognising that collective action and problem-solving require continuous learning and adaptation, and the creation of a flexible, creative and enabling environment for partners. This means that adaptive organisations respond better than hierarchical organisations to societal problems. What is important is for actors to work to their strengths and organise themselves around a shared vision and a common specific purpose, rather than around institutional structures and mandates. Furthermore, instead of waiting for complete and 'perfect' plans, data and partnerships to be in place, begin the work with a 'good enough' approach that is continually improved upon and undertaken with a few of the right people. Such an approach also enables the more effective use of data and technology by people with a shared purpose. Data informs but is not the goal, and data-led decision-making can result in invaluable, unmeasurable and intangible assets being ignored, such as relationships and partnerships. Technology can make data collection easier and more accurate, but human agency and collaboration is needed to make technology work.

