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**Failure to feed:**

**State, civil society and feeding  
schemes in South Africa in the first  
three months of Covid-19 lockdown,  
March to June 2020**

Jeremy Seekings

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**About the author:**

Jeremy Seekings is Professor of Political Studies and Sociology and director of the Centre for Social Science Research at the University of Cape Town.

Email: [jeremy.seekings@uct.ac.za](mailto:jeremy.seekings@uct.ac.za)

ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8029-412X>

# Failure to feed: state, civil society and feeding schemes in South Africa in the first three months of Covid-19 lockdown, March to June 2020<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Millions of South Africans had inadequate access to food prior to the lockdown imposed in response to Covid-19. The lockdown as well as the subsequent rapid transmission of Covid-19 in poor neighbourhoods worsened this crisis. A series of disastrous decisions by the national government led to its comprehensive failure to ensure that poor South Africans could access food during the lockdown. Crucially, the national government shut down its massive school feeding programme, depriving close to ten million children of daily meals. The national government had no plan to ensure food reached poor households. It was left to civil society – individuals and organisations, as donors and as volunteers – to try to fill the gap, with assistance from some provincial and local governments. The total amount of food distributed (through food parcels and feeding schemes) in the first three months of the lockdown was a tiny fraction of what was needed urgently – and was even a small fraction of what would ordinarily have been distributed without a lockdown. Because of the suspension of national school feeding, much less food was distributed in total under the lockdown than before it. The case of South Africa reveals that there can be a large gap between what governments announce and what they actually deliver.*

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<sup>1</sup> A much earlier version of part of this paper was published on [GroundUp](#) on 2<sup>nd</sup> June (and then republished elsewhere also). I tried repeatedly and failed to obtain clearer statistics (and explanations) from the national Departments of Social Development and Basic Education. I requested unsuccessfully an interview with the CEO of the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA). I owe a big thank you to: Dr Alison Misselhorn, Dr Mark Blecher, Dr Robert Macdonald, Shivhani Wahab, Anokhi Parikh, Sigamoney Naicker, Andy du Plessis, Paula Proudlock, Andrew Borraine, Paul Weinberg, Chantel King, Maria van der Merwe, Jared Rossouw, Equal Education and Section27, and Nathan Geffen. Whilst reporting in the South African media has been poor, I would like to acknowledge that there have been outstanding exceptions, especially on the online media *GroundUp* and *Daily Maverick*. I am grateful to Tariro Washinyira and GroundUp for permission to use photographs. The lockdown has also precluded most academic fieldwork on the effects of lockdown on the ground. For a notable exception, see the [Lockdown Diary Project](#) (a collaboration between the University of the Western Cape and Edinburgh University in Scotland).

# 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in unprecedented social and economic ‘lockdowns’ covering as much as two-thirds of the world’s population. In both richer and poorer countries, millions of people were rendered destitute by job losses and the collapse of informal livelihoods. International organisations called for bold actions to address the challenge of deepening poverty. National governments announced diverse measures (see Gentilini et al., 2020).

South Africa imposed a severe lockdown in late March 2020, deepening an existing, pre-Covid crisis of unemployment, poverty and hunger. The South African government announced bold measures to ameliorate distress, which were reported as if announcements quickly and easily led to actual delivery. The primary component of the South African government’s mitigation strategy involved the expansion of unemployment insurance, supplements to existing social grants and the introduction of a new emergency grant. As I show in a second paper (Seekings, 2020a), the implementation of these reforms was highly uneven. Taking into account that some mitigation programmes were suspended, the overall benefits to poor South Africans were very much smaller than promised in the initial announcements.

Emergency feeding programmes comprised the second component of the government’s response. These were intended to fill the temporal gap whilst the various cash transfer programmes were being rolled out and to fill the distributional gap left due to the cash transfer programmes’ incomplete coverage of poor people. This paper examines the experience of feeding schemes during the lockdown. I show that the national government failed to provide poor people with food during the lockdown it imposed on them. Not only was less food distributed to the poor under the lockdown than before it, and this met only a small fraction of the need, but also most of the food was delivered by civil society – individuals and organisations, as donors and as volunteers – with some assistance from provincial and local government, and very little assistance from national government. This is a story in which the heroes are in civil society. But civil society cannot fill the huge gap left by a delinquent national state.

The first part of this paper considers the background to feeding schemes globally and in South Africa. The paper then examines the responses to lockdown of the national and provincial governments. The paper then reviews the responses of the different groups that comprise ‘civil society’. Finally, the paper examines the failure of the South African parliament to hold the national government to account.

## 2. The background: Feeding schemes prior to the pandemic and lockdown

Feeding schemes are an integral part of global, national and local responses to hunger and food insecurity, whether these are the result of war and dislocation, natural disasters, pandemics, economic recessions or chronic poverty.

### 2.1 Globally

At the international level, famine relief was driven first by famines due to war and later to famines resulting from natural disasters. Later still, international organisations threw their weight behind chronic feeding programmes, especially for schoolchildren.

The British-based charity Oxfam was established (as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief) in 1942, to get food supplies to Greece. Between 1943 and 1947 the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration provided massive quantities of food across much of Europe. The World Food Programme (WFP) was established in the early 1960s to procure maize, rice and other basic foods and deliver them to populations experiencing crises. Humanitarian feeding operations in the Horn of Africa attracted global attention in the 1980s and since (de Waal, 1997). National governments have also been heavily involved in emergency food supplies. In India under British rule, ‘Famine Codes’ set out what imperial officials should do both in anticipation of and in response to famine (McAlpin, 1987). Colonial governments across Africa were generally less interventionist (as Vaughan [1987] and Mandala [2005] show for the case of late colonial Malawi) but, following independence, many governments have been much more responsive. In Botswana, state-run drought relief played a major role in the construction of a modern state (Seekings, 2016a, 2016b). The combination of international and national action means that natural disasters now rarely lead to starvation and almost never do so in democracies (de Waal, 2000; Burchi, 2011).

Feeding schemes are now also an integral feature of social protection systems across much of the world, even in the absence of natural or other disasters. The WFP expanded from its emergency operations to provide chronic support for feeding schemes for pregnant and lactating women, pre-school children, children in school (in part to encourage them to attend school) and other food-insecure households (often through food-for-work programmes). In 2009 the World Bank and WFP collaborated on a volume on *Rethinking School Feeding*. They reported that ‘the available data suggest that today, perhaps for the first time in history, every country for which we have information is seeking to provide food, in some way and at some scale, to its schoolchildren’ (World Bank and World Food

Programme, 2009: xv). Four years later, the WFP reported that, globally, at least 368 million children (i.e. one in five of the world's children) were fed daily at school, at a total cost of about US\$75 billion p.a. (World Food Programme, 2013: x). Many African countries operate school and other feeding programmes. The World Bank lists school feeding programmes in African countries that reach about 30 million children (World Bank, 2015: 104-16; see also Drake et al., 2016). Whilst there is an ongoing debate about the merits of cash transfers (through social grants or cash-for-work schemes) compared with feeding schemes (see Gentilini, 2016, I estimate that the number of children benefitting from school feeding schemes in Africa is probably double the number of children benefitting from cash transfer programmes. The World Bank (2015) also lists other feeding schemes, i.e. excluding school feeding schemes, that reached 20 million people across Africa. This figure varies from year to year, depending on the incidence of famine, but never drops to zero because some of these extra-school feeding programmes are ongoing.

A concern with 'food security' informed and was in turn fuelled by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). MDG 1 aimed at the eradication of extreme hunger and poverty. More recently, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 aims at 'zero hunger'.

## **2.2 The history of feeding schemes in South Africa**

South Africa has a long history of emergency feeding schemes in response to episodic shocks of natural disasters. For the most part, South Africa (like Southern Rhodesia) prevented famine through market mechanisms, including both remittances from migrant labour and privately-supplied food (see Iliffe, 1990, on Southern Rhodesia). Intermittently, however, the state had to step in (Wylie, 2001: Chapter 3). School feeding schemes were first introduced in the early twentieth century, by provincial administrations. In 1943, the state introduced a national programme for primary schools, for 'all school children, irrespective of their race or colour' (Jan Hofmeyr, quoted in Kallaway, 1996: 4). In 1944, one million children received school meals; only one-third of these children were white. The provision of school meals to black children was opposed by the National Party. Elected into government in 1948, the National Party sought to terminate such provision. In the late 1950s government funding was discontinued entirely. From then on, the only feeding schemes were ones run by civil society (Kallaway, 1996), reflecting the National Party's antipathy to the very idea of a welfare state (see Seekings, 2020b). The Peninsula School Feeding Association (PSFA) was one of the organisations established (in 1958) to take over school feeding.

## 2.3 State feeding schemes since 1994

Tax-financed school feeding schemes were reintroduced in South Africa only after the democratic elections of 1994. A Primary School Nutrition Scheme was one of President Mandela's favoured projects under the Reconstruction and Development Programme (Kallaway, 1996). The scheme entailed a partnership between state and civil society. At some point, however, the state assumed full responsibility, first through the Department of Health and later (from 2004) the Department of Basic Education. The number of children being fed through the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) rose steadily, to 5 million in 2005-6 (*ibid*: 418) to 9.6 million in 2018-19. It is funded through a 'conditional grant' from the National Treasury to the Department of Basic Education, which means that the funds are earmarked for school meals. The NSNP was evaluated for the national Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) in 2015-16. The DPME strongly endorsed the programme and indeed called for it to be extended to more schoolchildren as well as to pre-school children (South Africa, 2017). In both 2018-19 and 2019-20, the budget was slightly under R 7 billion per year. NSNP meals are supposed to provide at least 35-40% of a child's daily nutritional needs. A report in 2018, following a workshop on the NSNP, concluded that there were many important aspects of the programme that were poorly documented and warranted careful scrutiny (Devereux et al., 2018).

The post-apartheid state also provides food parcels as well as food vouchers through its Social Relief of Distress scheme, administered through the Department of Social Development (DoSD) and the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) under the 2004 Social Assistance Act. In 2009, the DoSD introduced a 'Food For All' campaign. The Minister (Zola Skweyiya) [explained](#) that the food parcel scheme was 'meant to assist the poorest of the poor and the most vulnerable households', for a short period of time and under specific circumstances (such as the death of the breadwinner or awaiting another social grant). The application process (as set out on the [Department of Social Development's website](#)) requires applicants to go in person to a SASSA office and present a battery of documents, including a supporting statement from a social worker, councillor, chief or minister of religion. Sehlabane (2014) found that in practice it is social workers who identify deserving individuals, then SASSA approves the recommendation. Extensions beyond three months are also dependent on a letter of motivation written by a social worker.

In the 2018-19 year, SASSA made almost 444,000 Social Relief of Distress 'awards' at a cost of R 485 million (i.e. equivalent to only 7 percent of the NSNP budget). Of these, 288,000 'awards' were in the form of food parcels and 102,000 were in the form of food vouchers; most of the remainder involved the provision of school uniforms. Many of the beneficiaries were destitute and needed

assistance whilst they were applying for one or other social grant (South African Social Security Agency [SASSA], 2019: 56).

The Department of Social Development specifies a minimum set of packaged foods to be included in the standard Social Relief of Distress food parcel. It implies that this is sufficient to feed at least one meal per day for a family of four for one month, i.e. a total of more than 120 meals. As independent experts point out, the package – worth more than R700 in major retailers – meets at most one half of the full nutritional needs of four people for one month. Moreover, it is not nutritionally adequate (for example, it lacks fruit and vegetables) and does not provide for the specific nutritional needs of children.<sup>2</sup> Food vouchers were, in 2013, worth about R3,000 for three months. They could be distributed as supermarket ‘gift’ cards or as preloaded debit cards. There was no requirement that the vouchers be used on food, although the Department of Social Development limited the number of shops where they could be used (South Africa, 2013: 10).

The Department of Social Development also oversaw a countrywide network of Community Nutrition and Development Centres (CNDCs) that provided cooked meals for the poor. Most of these [CNDCs were established](#) under a Household Food and Nutrition Security Strategy approved by the cabinet in 2013. The original plan had been to establish food distribution centres in a process facilitated by a non-profit organisation, FoodBank South Africa, funded by the National Treasury. FoodBank had been established in 2009 to source surplus food from producers, retailers and restaurants and redistribute it to poor people. The plan was revised subsequently, apparently to render it more developmental by investing in ‘sustainable livelihoods’ (through, for example, sourcing food from local black or ‘emerging’ farmers) – very much in line with the preference within the government for developmental initiatives over ‘handouts’.

From about 2016, each CNDC was supposed to provide a daily cooked meal, from Monday to Friday, to a minimum of 250 people identified as in need in the local areas. The number of CNDCs seems to have grown from about fifty in about 2016 to 235 by 2019. If each CNDC was distributing food to its full complement of 250 people, then the 235 CNDCs would have been providing a total of almost 60,000 meals daily, i.e. almost 300,000 per week or – assuming they operated for close to fifty weeks per year – more than 10 million meals per year. This meant that the programme distributed in total about one-fifth of the food distributed through the Social Relief of Distress programme and less than 1 percent of the food distributed

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Maria van der Merwe for this assessment. Ms van der Merwe is a registered dietitian and nutritionist and spokesperson for both the Association for Dietetics in South Africa and the Nutrition Society of South Africa.



through the NSNP. Details are unclear, but my understanding is that by 2019-20 the CNDCs were funded in more or less equal parts by national and provincial governments. The actual distribution of food to CNDCs – through Provincial Food Development Centres (PFDCs) – was contracted out to non-profit organisations. In the Western Cape, the contract was held by Ilitha Labantu (see below).

Both the national and provincial Departments of Social Development also funded small feeding schemes through Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres. The national department's grants to ECD centres are supposed to cover part of the cost of meals. As of 2015, fewer than 300,000 children were attending about 4,000 registered ECD centres (excluding children in grade R in primary schools) (Hall, 2018: 151). By 2020, about 700,000 children attended registered and [government-subsidised ECD centres](#). Another 2 million children attended unregistered – and unsubsidised – facilities, some of which were supported by non-profit organisations for providing meals. At least some of the provincial departments have provided funds to ECD centres specifically for feeding schemes. In the Western Cape, the provincial government funded approximately 1,100 ECD centres feeding up to 80,000 children per day. I cannot ascertain whether the provincial and national governments were subsidizing the same or different ECDs. It seems logical to assume a total of fewer than one million preschool children received meals subsidized by one or other part of government or civil society.

## 2.4 Civil society feeding schemes

Despite the rapid expansion of the state's school feeding scheme (and other, much more modest schemes), civil society remained active. In the Cape Town area, the [PSFA](#) had been established in 1958, as an initiative of Rotary Clubs, in direct response to the apartheid state's withdrawal from school feeding. The reintroduction of the state's school feeding scheme in the 1990s and 2000s meant that the PSFA's focus shifted, to the provision of fortified porridge for breakfast. In the [last quarter of 2019](#), PSFA was feeding more than 26,000 children in schools, close to 1,000 children in ECD centres or 'safe parks' for orphans and vulnerable children, and 700 students in tertiary institutions. The PSFA has also provided cooked school lunches under contract for the state, under the NSNP.

A number of other civil society organisations involved in feeding schemes were established in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Also in Cape Town, the [Mustadafin Foundation](#) was established in 1986 in response to the crisis on the Cape Flats precipitated by the apartheid state's attempts to remove by force (on which, see Cole, 1987). The Foundation – which is explicitly Islamic, also running Islamic community centres and madrassas – fed up to 15,000 people daily prior to the Covid-19 crisis. [Gift of the Givers](#) (*Waqful Waqifin*) – another Islamic charity –

was established in 1992 by a medical doctor who returned to South Africa after working in Turkey. Gift of the Givers grew into (in its own words) ‘the largest disaster response, non-governmental organisation of African origin on the African continent’, distributing ‘in excess of 100,000 food parcels annually’. It began to serve hot meals at its own centres in 1997 and initiated a food parcel scheme in 2002. It is based in Pietermaritzburg, with offices around South Africa. [Afrika Tikkun](#) was established in 1994 by Jewish South African philanthropists, with the goal of ‘uplifting’ young people from disadvantaged areas, including through feeding schemes. [Ilitha Labantu](#) was founded in 1989 in Cape Town’s township of Gugulethu. Although its original focus was on violence against women, it became more and more involved in feeding schemes. By 2019 it was, for example, running food distribution to CNDCs across the Western Cape, and was itself operating the CNDC in Gugulethu.

A number of other non-profit organisations were established across South Africa in the 2000s. The Lunchbox Fund was established in 2004/5 by South African-born model Topaz Page-Green. The fund raises money to pay for school meals. Initially it provided meals for eighty children in Soweto. [By 2015](#) it was providing 2.6 million meals per year to 13,000 children. Its goal was to reach 50,000 children by 2017. In 2019 it received a big boost when Prince Harry (of the United Kingdom) and his wife Megan [endorsed](#) it.

[Joint Aid Management](#) (JAM), an explicitly Christian initiative, introduced a Nutritional Feeding programme – providing fortified porridge – for 5,000 primary school children in Orange Farm (Gauteng) in 2005. Its focus subsequently shifted to preschool children. It expanded to the Eastern Cape (2012), Western Cape and Limpopo (2014), North West (2015), Free State and Northern Cape (2016) and Mpumalanga (2017). It is unclear when it began operations in KwaZulu-Natal. In the [third quarter of 2018](#), JAM was feeding 100,000 children in South Africa, through 2,663 Early Childhood Development centres. JAM operates in a number of other African countries also.

South African businesses have also supported feeding schemes as part of their social responsibility efforts. Tiger Brands – the manufacturer of a wide range of packaged foods – established the [Tiger Brands Foundation](#) in 2009. The foundation aims ‘to improve the lives of vulnerable school children and their surrounding communities by creating sustainable, scalable and replicable programmes focused on nutrition and education enhancement’. The foundation delivered, between 2011 and 2019, an average of nine million breakfasts to children, complementing the lunches provided by the NSNP. As of 2019, breakfasts were served to 72,000 children in 94 schools, with an annual total of almost 14 million meals. The breakfasts are served by volunteers, who receive training that will hopefully help them to establish their own small businesses in

future. In 2018, the foundation spent just over R 28 million, of which 11 percent was on administration (Tiger Brands Foundation, 2019). Several seafood producers also have foundations, including the [Sea Harvest Foundation](#), working in the Saldanha Bay area (north of Cape Town).

Business-linked organisations also sought to make use of the massive volume of food that is wasted. A report by the World Wide Fund for Nature (formerly the World Wildlife Fund) cited earlier research from 2013 that estimated that one-third of all food in South Africa – or 10 million tons per year – was not eaten and instead ended up in landfills. This wasted food was worth 2 percent of South Africa’s GDP (World Wide Fund for Nature South Africa [WWF-SA], 2017). As the Operations Manager at the Tiger Brands Foundation [said](#), ‘All of this food wastage occurs while an estimated 12 million South Africans go to bed hungry every night’. FoodBank South Africa (mentioned above) was established in 2009 to redistribute surplus food to the poor. At some point FoodBankSA transformed itself into FoodForwardSA. By [2017](#) it was redistributing food for 14.5 million meals per year, at very low cost (less than R1 per meal, compared with between R2 and R3 per meal in most other programmes). [FoodForward](#) now describes itself as a ‘food redistribution agency’, receiving ‘surplus’ food from retailers (including PickNPay and Woolworths) and farmers, storing it, and redistributing it through approved locally-based organisations. In [2019](#), it redistributed more than 5,000 tons of food, sufficient for more than 20 million meals, to 670 local organisations. Whilst the actual cost was low, because the food itself was free, the retail value of the food was estimated at more than R200 million. Another, much smaller, food redistribution operation – redistributing perishable food in refrigerated trucks as well as non-perishable food – is operated by [SA Harvest](#), launched in late 2019, just before the Covid-19 pandemic hit. SA Harvest’s first corporate donor was [Vida e Caffè](#).

These civil society initiatives were important, especially in reaching households and individual children who were not covered by state social grants or feeding programmes. But the total scale of civil society operations was dwarfed by the state’s NSNP (supplemented by its Social Relief of Distress programme). Prior to the lockdown, the NSNP provided a daily meal for 9.6 million children on 195 school days per year. This amounts to a total of close to 2 billion meals per year (i.e. the equivalent of more than 100 million food parcels). The Social Relief of Distress programme provided a total of approximately 400,000 food parcels (or the equivalent in vouchers) per year, or about 50 million meals per year. The budget for the NSNP for 2019-20 was close to R7 billion. An additional R 0.4 billion was budgeted for the Social Relief of Distress in 2019-20. Only the state could fund feeding schemes on this massive scale.

## 2.5 The existing crisis of food insecurity

Despite these government and civil society initiatives, South Africa was experiencing a food crisis prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. This was evident in a [study published in 2019](#) by the parastatal Statistics South Africa (StatsSA, 2019), using primarily data from its General Household Surveys, conducted annually since 2002 up to 2017. The survey data indicated that the number of people in South Africa who reportedly experienced hunger fell until about 2006/7 but remained broadly stable thereafter. The survey showed that hunger was slightly more prevalent in urban than in rural areas. The proportion experiencing hunger was highest in the Northern Cape and lowest in Limpopo. An earlier survey in Cape Town suggested that, in this city at least, the most pervasive problem was the ‘normalisation of poor diets’ (Crush, Caesar & Haysom, 2018). Qualitative as well as survey research at the local level revealed that food insecurity was exacerbated by the tightening constraints on subsistence agriculture as well as foraging, whilst social grants were insufficient to meet households’ needs (Chakona & Shackleton, 2017, 2019).

Government officials accepted these findings. The DPME, in a presentation at the end of 2017 to the parliamentary portfolio committee on agriculture, reported that 12 percent of all households were vulnerable to hunger (in 2016) and 22 percent had inadequate or severely inadequate access to food. The consequence was widespread stunting among children (South Africa, 2017). The following year the national Department of Social Development [acknowledged](#) that close to one million households had ‘severely inadequate access to food’ and another 2.5 million households had ‘inadequate access’ – giving a total of close to 14 million people, prior to the lockdown. This figure was later [repeated](#) (and [repeated](#)). By the government’s own recognition, the lockdown deepened an existing crisis.

## 3. Covid-19, lockdown and South Africa’s deepening food crisis

The first case of Covid-19 in South Africa was announced on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2020. By the 15<sup>th</sup> of March there were fifty confirmed cases, including the first cases of local transmission. That day President Cyril Ramaphosa [declared a national state of disaster](#), giving his government a battery of extraordinary powers. Constraints were placed on bars and restaurants, and schools and universities were closed. The following week, as the number of confirmed cases passed four hundred, Ramaphosa [announced that a full countrywide lockdown](#) would be in effect from midnight on Thursday the 26<sup>th</sup> of March. The number of confirmed cases passed one thousand and the country’s first death were announced on the first day of the lockdown, Friday the 27<sup>th</sup> of March.

The lockdown worsened the food crisis. Millions of employed people lost their jobs and most or all of their income. Millions more people depending on informal livelihoods have been left without any income. Civil society experts estimated that as much as [half of the South African population needed food](#). Surveys of public opinion (conducted by phone or online) found widespread anxiety over unemployment and the challenges of feeding families. As many as one in three adults reported that they went to bed hungry. Many households were running down savings or running up debt (AskAfrica 2020). A series of surveys conducted by the University of Johannesburg and the Human Sciences Research Council, with a large but opportunistic sample, found that the proportion of respondents who had themselves gone to bed hungry had risen from 33% at the beginning of the lockdown to 43% just one month later. The proportion reporting that someone else in the household had gone to bed hungry was lower, but had also risen (University of Johannesburg/Human Sciences Research Council, 2020).

Officials from the national Department of Social Development repeatedly told the parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Social Development that food insecurity and hunger had increased under the lockdown. One Deputy Director-General confirmed this on the [29<sup>th</sup> of May](#). On the 11<sup>th</sup> of June, one of the other Deputy Director-Generals [told the Portfolio Committee](#) that food security had become a national crisis and about 50% of the population was at risk of food insecurity (see also South Africa, 2020). This figure was repeated in [subsequent presentations](#).



A wonderful cartoon<sup>3</sup> by Carlos, published in the *Mail and Guardian* (8<sup>th</sup> of May 2020), showed President Ramaphosa trying to close one door to stop the wolf of Covid-19 whilst the wolf of hunger walks in through another, open door.

<sup>3</sup> Copyright Carlos Amato 2020 ([www.carlosamato.work](http://www.carlosamato.work)).

### 3.1 The suspension of the national school meal programme

The first immediate effect of the lockdown was that South Africa's existing public feeding schemes were suspended without any plausible plan to set up compensatory emergency systems. The closure of schools meant that 9.6 million children no longer received daily school meals under the NSNP. The much smaller public Social Relief of Distress, CNDC-based and ECD centre-based programmes were also disrupted. Put simply, just as the need for food escalated, the state locked the doors of its food cupboard and walked away.

The NSNP was suspended on 18<sup>th</sup> March (according to the Department of Basic Education in [subsequent court papers](#)). On the 26<sup>th</sup> of March, i.e. shortly before the lockdown took effect, the Minister of Basic Education declared at a press conference that it was 'impossible' to operate school feeding schemes under the lockdown. According to [press reports](#), Minister Motshekga said that the scheme depended on teachers who were not at work and schools that were closed. She was quoted as saying:

Outside our infrastructure, which is schools and teachers, we are unable to feed children in communities during the lockdown. It is going to be impossible to track the 9.6-million children we are feeding and say we are running the feeding scheme during the lockdown. We agreed with MECs of education in our meeting this morning that it is mission impossible - we will not be able to do it.

She also said that she had handed over school feeding to the Department of Social Development for minister Lindiwe Zulu to run with, if she could. Her Director-General [later added](#) additional explanations:

Because the Disaster Management Regulations did not provide for school nutrition as an 'essential service' ... all key stakeholders in the Basic Education Sector concluded that school feeding would not only be unlawful... but undesirable as young learners would violate the law by leaving their homes.

Also, he averred, the Conditional Grant used to pay for the NSNP allowed school feeding only 'on school days when the schools are open ... [T]o go outside these parameters will be unlawful ...'

The Departments of Basic Education, Social Development and Health [allegedly](#) met on 23<sup>rd</sup> March. They agreed that Social Development would distribute food parcels to 'needy households', using 'Disaster Relief Management and Social Relief Funds of some R900-million and R500-million respectively'.

The national government was therefore left sitting on an unspent budget for feeding schoolchildren of close to R 1 billion per month (R7 billion for the school year of 195 days). This budget falls under a ‘conditional grant’ to the national Department of Basic Education, i.e. it is earmarked for school meals. I am told that the national Department of Basic Education refused to allow provincial education departments to use the conditional grant to continue with school feeding under the lockdown.

Very early in the lockdown (on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March), the National Treasury circulated a memorandum advising provincial governments that they could use up to 5% of the annual funding for the school feeding scheme to run emergency feeding schemes for school children – subject to parliamentary approval.<sup>4</sup> I am told that the national Department of Basic Education never organized parliamentary approval and the funds remained unused.

The Department of Social Development told me that ‘At the beginning of the lockdown we contacted the Department of [Basic] Education’, asking about plans for school feeding; ‘we were told that kids will eat what they used to eat while schools were closed’. The Department of Social Development did not appear to have known about the Treasury’s attempt to make funds available for emergency school feeding. It is widely said that the Department of Basic Education initially viewed the lockdown as a school ‘holiday’ and imagined that schools would catch up on teaching days – and, presumably, school meals – later in the year. With hindsight this (if true) was a bad call, but even at the time the Department surely erred in thinking that the prospect of school meals later in the year was any substitute for feeding children during the lockdown.

Much later, the Minister of Social Development [told](#) the parliamentary Portfolio Committee that the Department of Basic Education had contacted her department at the start of the lockdown, saying that there was unused food in schools, and asking if Social Development could use it. It is not clear what Social Development did in response, but I can see no evidence that the food was in fact used.

The suspension of school feeding was criticized sharply by the Democratic Alliance (DA) – i.e. the opposition party at the national level and the governing party in the Western Cape province – and by civil society organisations, as we shall see in the final section below.

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<sup>4</sup> Memo, ‘Guidance on the use of conditional grant funds to support Covid-19 response’, Malijeng Ngqaleni (DDG: Intergovernmental relations, National Treasury) to provincial treasuries, 27 March 2020.

In May, ministers provided more detail on what the national government was doing about school feeding schemes. Asked in Parliament what measures the Department of Basic Education had put in place to feed schoolchildren, the [Minister lamely replied](#) that a National Food and Nutrition Security Task Team – apparently located in the presidency itself – had agreed to bear schoolchildren in mind when handing out food parcels through the national Disaster Relief and Social Relief Management Programme. South Africa has had for decades a series of national plans dealing with food security, coordinated by ‘task teams’, but this process [seems to have stalled](#). A new five-year National Food and Nutrition Security Plan was drafted in 2017, by the DPME, which is located in the presidency (although it is not clear whether the plan was ever approved or adopted).

The Minister of Basic Education also referred to the ‘National Food and Security Task Team’ (comprising the departments of Basic Education, Social Development and Health) and ‘Disaster Relief and Social Relief Management Programme’ in a letter dated the 11<sup>th</sup> of May in reply to civil society organisations.<sup>5</sup> A separate committee – the Technical Working Committee for National Food and Nutrition Plan, led by the DPME – had decided that the Disaster Relief and Social Relief Management Plan should be coordinated by the DoSD. The letter described the purpose of this ‘coordination mechanism’ as being to ensure the effective distribution of food through the PFDCs and CNDCs, in terms of draft directives dated the 7<sup>th</sup> of May (discussed below, in the section on state commandism). But I cannot find anybody who has ever heard of this grandly-titled National Food and Nutrition Security Task Team (or its Disaster Relief and Social Relief Management Programme). Neither the Department of Basic Education nor the DPME have replied to my requests for clarification.

At the end of April, the Minister of Basic Education announced that schools would reopen on a phased basis from 1 June. Grade 7 and Grade 12 learners would return to school on 1 June, with children in the other grades returning at some unspecified future date. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of May, the Director-General of Basic Education made a public undertaking that the NSNP would be resumed from the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, including for those children who would not be physically attending school yet. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, the Minister retracted this undertaking: School feeding would not reopen until the Department of Basic Education had ‘found its feet’ and was ‘comfortable’ in ‘this new environment’. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of June, the civil society organisation Equal Education took the national Department of Basic Education (and provincial education departments) to court, seeking an order that the NSNP be resumed (Equal Education, 2020).

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<sup>5</sup> Letter, Mrs A.M.Motshekga, Minister of Basic Education, to Ms N. Ally, Equal Education Law Centre, 11 May 2020.



The human cost of the suspension of school feeding across most of the country was evident in the affidavits filed by Equal Education in its court application. Ms Malatsi – the parent of children at a Limpopo school – stated that she could not afford tea or sugar because she had to feed lunch to her children who were no longer being fed at school. She had to borrow money from a loan shark to make ends meet. She was not eligible for food parcels because she received child support grants. A grade 12 student at another Limpopo school stated that he and his younger sister survive on about R500 a month, sent by their mother who is away in Gauteng looking for work. The children eat pap twice a day with no meat, vegetables, sugar or milk. The suspension of the NSNP has been devastating for them. Other children missed out on two school meals daily. Hunger meant that children cried and quarreled. Children who had returned to school were trying to study on empty stomachs (Equal Education, 2020).

In short, the government suspended a massive feeding scheme (the biggest such scheme in Africa), appears to have had no plan, and appears to have failed to take advantage of the opportunity to reallocate some of the budget for emergency feeding. As we shall see, the promised delivery of government-funded food through the PFDCs and CNDCs proved to meet only a negligible fraction of the gap left by the suspension of the NSNP.

### **3.2 Preschool feeding schemes**

The parallel story of preschool feeding schemes is revealed in the lucid account of ECD centres by Robyn Wolfson Vorster in a series of articles published by the *Daily Maverick*, [including especially one on the 23rd of June](#). This section is based on Vorster's reporting.

ECD centres were closed on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March. Neither then nor later did the government have any plan. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, the Minister of Basic Education said at a press conference that the question of when ECDs would reopen had 'come out repeatedly' but the government had '[not given it full consideration](#)'. The Minister of Social Development added that discussions had begun with the National Treasury and other parts of government over this. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of May, however, the Minister announced that ECD centres would remain closed. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of May the official story was that there would be a 'phased' reopening of ECD centres. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, the Department of Basic Education announced that ECD centres would reopen from the 6<sup>th</sup> of July. But on that same day the Department of Social Development contradicted this, before later clarifying that only ECD centres attached to schools would reopen from the 6<sup>th</sup> of July. Critics charged that the continued closure of ECD centres was not in the best interests of poor children. As of late June, it remains unclear when ECD centres – and the feeding schemes attached to these – will reopen. As Verster concludes: 'If

government is committed to ensuring that “no child is left behind”, let’s hope its efforts aren’t too little, too late.’ Alarming, Verster reports that ‘many’ ECD centres ‘will never reopen’. Many are already selling off play equipment and other resources.

As many as 700,000 preschool children were in registered ECD centres and presumably receiving a subsidy that covered (inter alia) the cost of daily meals. Many more children attended unregistered ECD centres that received no government subsidy. These were funded largely by fees paid by parents, but some also received support, including for meals, from non-profit organisations. Taking into account only the registered and presumably government-subsidized ECD centres, their closure deprived preschool children of a total of 3.5 million meals per week or about 14 million meals per month.

At the end of June, the Department of Social Development [told](#) the parliamentary Portfolio Committee that ECD centres would reopen at a date to be decided. She implied that this could be sometime in July, i.e. about four months after they were closed.

### **3.3 The national Department of Social Development**

The Department of Basic Education’s school feeding programme was not the only feeding programme to be suspended during the lockdown. Until the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, the Department of Social Development financed the countrywide network of CNDCs that provided cooked meals for the poor. Most or even all CNDCs were closed for the first part of the lockdown, so these cooked meal schemes were suspended. Under a pre-lockdown agreement, these CNDCs were transferred to provincial control on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April. Some of the CNDCs resumed feeding operations, with a mix of funds (as we shall see below).

The lockdown also made it difficult for the SASSA to expand its existing Social Relief of Distress food parcel scheme. This scheme provides a very minimal safety-net of sorts and one might have expected that it would be massively and quickly expanded under lockdown. Lockdown regulations meant, however, that SASSA’s local offices were closed. By the end of the second month of lockdown, SASSA had [distributed only 73,000 food parcels](#) nationally – which is about the number that SASSA distributed every two months during the preceding year. Unlike the Department of Basic Education, SASSA did not shut down its feeding scheme, but it was unable to expand it in response to the emergency.

Neither the Department of Basic Education nor the Department of Social Development appear to have had any plan when the largest government feeding schemes were shut down under the lockdown. I have not found anyone outside the state who is aware that there was any plan. When the Solidarity Fund –

established under the lockdown to raise and allocate donor funding (see below) – and non-profit organisations met to discuss emergency feeding schemes, they were under the clear impression that there was no government plan. I have asked government officials if there was any plan. No official has produced any evidence of any plan.

### **3.4 Provincial and local government initiatives**

At least some provincial and local governments stepped in to fill part of the gap left by the suspension of national programmes. The fullest information is on the Western Cape, whose provincial government is controlled by the Democratic Alliance, i.e. the political party which is the primary opposition at the national level.

Early in the lockdown the Western Cape provincial government announced that it had allocated an additional R 30 million for food parcels, R 23 million for cooked meal schemes and R 16 million to support municipal initiatives. Municipalities contributed additional funding of their own. The City of Cape Town argued that food relief was not part of its mandate, but it did release R 12 million from the Mayor’s Relief Fund, redirecting unspent ward funds to community kitchen and protective equipment, as well as (after some delays) food parcels. Other municipalities in the province contributed another R 7 million. In total, therefore, provincial and local government seem to have committed about R 88 million for emergency feeding, dwarfing the modest sums spent on emergency programmes by national government in the province.

The provincial government also tried to fill the gap left by the suspension of school feeding. It allocated R18 million to the provincial Department of Education for an emergency school feeding program in approximately 1,000 schools, providing takeaway meals twice per week for children who had previously been fed daily through the now suspended NSNP. Between early April and the 12<sup>th</sup> of May, this emergency schoolchildren feeding programme [provided](#) more than 1.2 million meals. By the 8<sup>th</sup> of June – i.e. after precisely two months – the total number of meals provided had risen to 1.676 million.<sup>6</sup>

When the Western Cape Education Department announced that it would be resuming school feeding, the powerful South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) [denounced](#) the provincial department for undermining the national government’s plan to contain the pandemic. SADTU proposed that food parcels be distributed to people’s homes rather than children collecting meals from school. The provincial department went ahead, (re)opening feeding schemes –

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<sup>6</sup> Sigamoney Naicker (Chief Director Inclusive Education, Western Cape Education Department), personal communication, 25 June 2020.

with social distancing – at some schools on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April. The provincial education minister [commented that](#) ‘We cannot simply leave our children to go hungry’, adding that school feeding schemes were ‘no different to people going to shops to buy food, or the many soup kitchens that continue to operate’. In a [statement the next day](#), SADTU demanded that the provincial minister be fired for defying the national government.

The provincial government also allocated an additional R5 million for 10,000 cooked meals per day for one month, for people other than children, through a network of about 72 soup kitchens operated by NGOs as well as about twenty CNDs. The provincial Department of Social Development also reactivated feeding schemes at about two-thirds of the 1,100 Early Childhood Development centres funded by the department, feeding up to 80,000 children per day.

By late May the provincial government was, it says, funding an average of 100,000 meals per day.<sup>7</sup> On some days it may have been funding as many as 200,000 cooked meals.

Local government also acted, in at least some parts of the country. In Cape Town, the municipal government began to support soup kitchens from as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April, and by mid-May was supporting eighty kitchens. The kitchens themselves were operated and staffed by members of the community and civil society organisations, with local government donating food supplies and, in some cases, cooking equipment. Some of these kitchens were feeding one hundred people daily, others many more.<sup>8</sup>

## **4. Emergency food parcel schemes: Making sense of the data**

Officials from the Department of Social Development, in their public statements and presentations to the parliamentary Portfolio Committee, claimed that the total number of food parcels distributed had risen from 525,000 (sometime in early May) to 720,000 (as of the 21<sup>st</sup> of May), then to 788,000 (reported on the 29<sup>th</sup> of May), to 903,000 (on the 11<sup>th</sup> of June) and to 1,047,000 by the 25<sup>th</sup> of June.<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of the lockdown, government officials apparently promised that one million emergency food parcels would be distributed – although it is unclear over

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<sup>7</sup> Personal communication from the Director-General of the provincial Department of Social Development, 27 May 2020.

<sup>8</sup> See mayoral media releases on 29th April, 19th May and 24th June.

<sup>9</sup> Figures compiled from reports to Portfolio Committee.

what period, and I cannot trace a source for this promise. It seems likely that the total would rise to one million over the first three months of the lockdown.

A total of one million food parcels might sound like a lot. Prior to the lockdown, SASSA was distributing only about 35,000 parcels per month (or 400,000 per year). One million food parcels is a small figure compared to the need, however. Even if we assume, conservatively, that the number of households facing ‘severely inadequate access to food’ doubled under the lockdown, then the figures endorsed by the Department of Social Development itself imply a desperate need for nearly 2 million food parcels per month, or 6 million over three months, i.e. six times the total number of food parcels distributed during the first three months of the lockdown. This takes no account of the millions of households facing merely ‘inadequate access to food’. Nor does it meet the nutritional needs of households. Most of these food parcels provided for at most one half of a household’s nutritional needs, so they should be viewed as a supplement. Moreover, the Department of Social Development itself reported that half of the population faced food insecurity. This would mean a need for 7 million food parcels per month, i.e. more than twenty times as many as were actually distributed.

The reported figures were misleading in another respect. The Department of Social Development’s total figure of food parcels includes parcels distributed by civil society or provincial and local government. The department provides apparently precise data. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, they reported that 73,000 food parcels had been distributed by SASSA, 218,000 food parcels in partnership with the Solidarity Fund and 523,000 by the national Department. The latter figure was then broken down by province: 153,000 in Gauteng, 67,000 in the Western Cape, and so on. By [late June](#), the total figure had risen to just over 1 million, including 105,000 parcels distributed by SASSA under the Social Relief of Distress scheme, 303,000 distributed by the Solidarity Fund and 627,000 parcels listed under the Department of Social Development.

The national Department of Social Development’s data were compiled primarily from reports submitted by the provincial departments. The very uneven quality of provincial data is evident in the [reports by provincial ministers](#) to the parliamentary Portfolio Committee on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June. The national department had clearly provided the provincial departments with a template for reporting. They used this template in very different ways. The better performing provinces – in terms of both actual delivery and reporting – appear to have been Gauteng and the Western Cape, the Northern Cape and perhaps Limpopo and Mpumalanga. The Free State and KwaZulu-Natal appear to have performed poorly, whilst the North-West and Eastern Cape appear to have done almost

nothing. These four provinces between them reported that they had distributed, in total, only 90,000 food parcels.

It is very unclear what these data include and what they exclude. In Gauteng, much (perhaps most) food was distributed through district-level centres, operated by non-profit organisations. Gauteng's reported figure of 269,000 food parcels (updated verbally to 280,000 during the meeting) appears to include mostly food provided by civil society. The Western Cape, in contrast, reported that it had funded and distributed 51,000 food parcels. In total, in the province, more than 218,000 food parcels had been distributed, however. The national Department appears to have used neither of these actual provincial figures in its national aggregate. Some provinces appear to have included parcels distributed by the Solidarity Fund, others to have excluded them. In Mpumalanga, 60,000 food parcels had been distributed by late June, excluding 20,000 distributed by the Solidarity Fund.

To be fair, compiling precise data is probably impossible. This is in part because getting food to people who need it involves two stages. First, funds need to be raised and food purchased, or donations of food secured. Bulk supplies of food may need to be warehoused and packaged. Secondly, food needs to be distributed to selected households (through what is sometimes called 'last mile' distribution). These multiple stages mean that it is easy to double-count the distribution of food parcels. First, an institution (or even more than one institution) report that they have funded them and/or purchased food and distributed it to selected neighbourhoods. Then one or other local organisation reports that it has distributed the same parcels to deserving households.

In addition, despite the efforts of the national government and some provincial governments to impose central control over food distribution (see below), food parcels were distributed through provincial and local government and a multitude of civil society organisations. Even in the Western Cape, which tried to collect data systematically, the data should be considered to be (at best) approximate.

The data suggest that the only parcels funded directly by the national government were the 105,000 parcels distributed by SASSA through the pre-existing Social Relief of Distress channel. These cost SASSA R127 million, i.e. just over R1,000 per parcel. The food itself was valued at about R700. On top of this were small administrative charges and larger transport costs. The Department of Social Development also co-financed an approximate half-share of another 55,000 food parcels distributed through the Solidarity Fund. The provinces and municipalities funded some of their food parcels from funds transferred from central government under the pre-existing revenue-sharing system.

Most of the food parcels for the poor under the lockdown were financed and distributed by civil society. This is true also of emergency feeding schemes – serving meals – that are not included in the figures above for food parcels. It has been civil society together with provincial and local government that has tried to fill the gap left by the suspension of national feeding schemes. Faced with the failure of the national government and the huge need, civil society has quickly mobilized resources and set up unprecedented food distribution across the country. Even if these efforts have not been sufficient, they should be applauded loudly.

A fuller but still incomplete picture of emergency food provision is available for the Western Cape. The number of food parcels and meals provided in the province is significantly higher than the total reported by the national Department of Social Development. Only a small fraction of this total was funded by national government.

By late May, about 140,000 food parcels had been distributed in the province. The provincial government itself funded about 42,000 food parcels, making steady progress towards its goal of 50,000. Most of these were distributed through non-profit organisations (NPOs) (Mustadafin, Red Cross, Islamic Relief and the South African National Zakat Fund or SANZAF) with about 10,000 parcels distributed through local CNDCs. It is unclear precisely how many food parcels have been distributed through municipal schemes but the number is probably in the thousands, not tens of thousands. SASSA had distributed 11,000 Social Relief of Distress food parcels. (When the Department of Social Development and SASSA reported to the parliamentary portfolio committee on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, they appeared to show [that](#) they had rejected almost all applications for Social Relief of Distress food parcels in the Western Cape).

The other 80,000 food parcels distributed in the province by late May had been funded and distributed by civil society actors, including more than 30,000 through the Solidarity Fund. The Solidarity Fund distributed more than 18,000 parcels through two large NPOs (FoodForwardSA and Afrika Tikkun), 8,000 direct to community-based organisations, and 5,000 through CNDCs. If we credit the Department of Social Development with co-funding one half of the 5,000 food parcels distributed through the Solidarity Fund to CNDCs, then it seems that national government funded less than 15,000 parcels in the Western Cape, i.e. a small fraction of the minimum total of 140,000 parcels.

Data for the ten weeks between late March and early June were collated by the Western Cape Food Relief Coordinating Forum (established to bring together civil society and government in the province). The data suggested that civil society had distributed about 77,000 food parcels, excluding parcels delivered on

behalf of the Solidarity Fund or government. The average food parcel was, however, smaller than the various government-approved parcels. In addition, more than 3 million meals had been served (Boraine, 2020). The Coordinating Forum derived these totals from data reported by fourteen intermediary NGOs that delivered food to the community-based organisations and kitchens that distributed it. The data might include some duplication but also excludes food delivered directly by small NGOs (including community action networks, see below). The data also excluded food delivered by Gift of the Givers. As the Forum's coordinator, Andrew Boraine, points out, the priority was to deliver food to people in need, not to collect data. NGOs were encouraged to report using online sites, but even the larger NPOs struggled to do this.<sup>10</sup>

These figures suggest that the national Department of Social Development under-reported the actual distribution of food parcels in the Western Cape by perhaps one-third. I have tried to find out from the national Department how they arrived at the figures they reported to parliament. A senior official told me that the provinces send in data regularly (daily even), although there is a lag of about one week. When I queried this with the provincial department, they wondered whether their counterparts in the national department were using data on the province's original target – which had been surpassed – rather than data on actual distribution. This does not inspire confidence in the national Department of Social Development.

## 5. Civil society: The big players

Civil society is a very diverse category. Some of the actors in civil society have been large-scale operations run along quasi-corporate lines, sometimes by volunteers with corporate backgrounds.

The largest actor was the [Solidarity Fund](#), established under the lockdown to channel donations from private individuals and companies. Donations to the Fund had passed R 2.5 billion (as of the 28<sup>th</sup> of May), including initial seed money of R 150 million from government. More than half of this came from Mary Oppenheimer and daughters (who donated more than R1 billion) and Naspers (R500 million). The Fund received donations from a total of about 1 800 corporates and trusts and nearly 264,000 individuals by mid-June. Most of the Fund's expenditure was on medical supplies and activities, with smaller sums allocated to emergency feeding. In mid-April, it committed R 120 million for food parcels for poor households, using existing civil society organisations. One half of this budget was allocated to four large NPOs: [FoodForward](#), [Afrika Tikkun](#),

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<sup>10</sup> Boraine, in a webinar (23 June) and in personal communication to me (2 July). The online sites were [www.fooddistribution.co.za](http://www.fooddistribution.co.za) and [foodhelp.co.za](http://foodhelp.co.za).



[Islamic Relief](#) and the [Lunchbox Fund](#). These NPOs bought food in bulk and delivered it to their networks of more than four hundred local organisations to distribute to poor households. One quarter of the Solidarity Fund’s food parcel budget was allocated to the CNDCs, for households that would usually benefit from cooked meal provision; the national Department of Social Development itself more-or-less matched the Solidarity Fund contribution, putting in an additional R 20 million. The final quarter of the Solidarity Fund’s food parcel budget was allocated to community- and faith-based organisations at provincial and local levels, especially in rural areas; the Solidarity Fund worked with two logistics companies to source, pack and deliver food to the local organisations.

Through these channels the Solidarity Fund ensured delivery of a total of 280,000 food parcels between the 15<sup>th</sup> of April and the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May – somewhat more than the Department of Social Development reported on the 29<sup>th</sup> of May. More than 154,000 parcels were distributed through the four big NPOs, including 86,500 through FoodForward alone. Just under 60,000 were distributed through the CNDCs (using the combined Solidarity Fund and Department of Social Development funding). Slightly more – 66,000 – were distributed through community and faith-based organisations.

The NPOs used other sources of funding to provide additional food. The Lunchbox Foundation, for example, told me that they supplied a total of about 105,000 ‘family food boxes’ between about the 20<sup>th</sup> of April and late May, using funds from the eNCA (eNews Channel Africa) and HCI (Hosken Consolidated Investments) Foundation as well as the Solidarity Fund. FoodForward – which describes itself as a ‘food redistribution agency’, receiving ‘surplus’ food from retailers (including PickNPay and Woolworths) and farmers, stores it, and redistributing it through approved locally-based organisations – told me that they have redistributed about R55 million worth of donated food in addition to the food purchased using money from the Solidarity Fund (and other donors). In the first weeks of the lockdown, FoodForward distributed large volumes of food. In the second half of April, FoodForward concentrated on distributing the food parcels paid for by the Solidarity Fund. In May, it [reported](#), it redistributed sufficient donated food for at least a further 120,000 food parcels.

Various companies (and corporate foundations) were also very active in the provision of emergency food parcels. The Tiger Brands Foundation kept open all of their pre-Covid children-feeding schemes, providing nearly 80 000 children with a nutritious breakfast, supplied additional food parcels and restarted usually dormant programmes like ‘Plates4Days’ serving students in higher education institutions. Tiger Brands also [appealed to its competitors](#):

We should start by collaborating not just with our partners and charities, but with our competitors. Crisis moments make for unusual bedfellows, but the urgency of the present moment asks us to transcend traditional barriers such as competitive advantage, market share and media visibility. Imagine the impact that farmers, food manufacturers and retailers could make if they collaborated to reduce food wastage. A third of South Africa's food production goes to waste, yet over 10 million people go to bed hungry each night.

The CEO of fishing company Oceana, Imraan Soomra, [told the press](#) that his company had supported frontline medical services as well as vulnerable communities.

This has included the distribution of 12 000 food parcels and 45 000 cans of Lucky Star to help feed distressed communities, including the critical small-scale fishing sector. We have also provided food parcels to thousands of employees, while a special fund has been set up to reward our staff for their commitment in ensuring an uninterrupted supply of food. In addition, Oceana has made available over 146 000 litres of water every day from our various desalination facilities and other sites to government and relief organisations to assist communities without access to clean water.

The Sea Harvest Foundation had similarly supported poor households, especially in the Saldanha Bay area.

The provincial government reports to the parliamentary Portfolio Committee meeting on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June list some of the other major donors. In the Eastern Cape, HCI distributed more than 20,000 parcels through the LunchBox Foundation. Much smaller numbers of parcels were distributed by, among others, Tiger Brands, the Old Mutual Foundation, the National Lottery Fund, Multi-Choice (through JAM) and Albany Bakery. In Gauteng, ShellSA donated 10,000 parcels. In the Northern Cape, mining company De Beers donated food parcels.

Gift of the Givers provided 70,000 food parcels and funded one hundred feeding centres. In Cape Town, the PSFA had [distributed over 9,000 parcels](#) by 8<sup>th</sup> April; by the end of June it had distributed 53,000.<sup>11</sup> It was also providing up to 30,000 cooked meals daily, funded in large part by the provincial government.

The largest 'intermediary' NGO in Cape Town was Community Chest, according to data collated by the Coordinating Forum. The second largest was [Ladles of Love](#), operating out of the International Convention Centre. Ladles of Love

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<sup>11</sup> Contribution from Petrina Pakoe to webinar, 25 June 2020.

distributing 25,000 homemade sandwiches daily as well as preparing soup and other food to be distributed to school children. Over three months, Ladles of Love distributed a total of 2.5 million meals and 1.25 million sandwiches, to more than 360 different sites, according to the Coordinating Forum. The Convention Centre also served as a depot for food for community initiatives across the city.

Farmers, food companies and agri-processing companies in the Western Cape made a large number of donations to intermediary organisations to distribute to grassroots structures. The DG Murray Trust and the Western Cape Economic Development Partnership raised just under R3 million to supply 75 Community Kitchens with weekly digital vouchers to purchase food supplies and equipment.

## **6. Civil society: Grass roots initiatives**

Across the major cities, and perhaps elsewhere also, there was an extraordinary effervescence of grass roots initiatives. Local organisations – some existing, mostly new – distributed food, sometimes with funds from provincial or local government, sometimes with funds or food from the large NPOs (including the Solidarity Fund) or funds they had raised themselves. In Cape Town, Community Action Networks (CANs) were established by people in both relatively prosperous and relatively poor neighbourhoods. In more prosperous areas, volunteers collected food or money, which was then used either to support poor or vulnerable local residents – such as the elderly or homeless – or was sent to volunteers in poorer neighbourhoods for distribution, whether as meals or food parcels. In Cape Town, this was co-ordinated loosely through a grouping called [Cape Town Together](#). An internal survey identified no fewer than 170 informal feeding programmes being operated by CANs, most of which did not exist a month prior to the pandemic and lockdown. An estimated 13,000 people joined the Cape Town Together facebook page and approximately 2,500 people volunteers were active through the CANs.

Some CANs even have their own websites (making use of the skills of website-savvy volunteers). The (Atlantic) [Seaboard CAN](#), for example, has a website explaining that the CAN brought ‘together filmmakers, administrators, educators, managers, nurses, koeksister aunties, soccer coaches, carers, artists and more’, most of whom did not previously know each other, into a 130-member strong Whatsapp group. The Seaboard CAN had partnered with community organisations in Guguletu (one of Cape Town’s townships) as well as assisting homeless people in the area and five hundred poor families living in an unused building in Granger Bay,

Residents of Muizenberg formed a CAN to assist residents of the neighbouring Vrygrond township and Overcamp informal settlement. Volunteers prepare cooked meals in Muizenberg itself. They also collect donated food and purchase food (using donated funds) which is [divided up between 15 community kitchens](#), in Vrygrond, established by the community organisation Vrygrond United 4 Change. The kitchens – operating out of private homes – serve lunches and sometimes also breakfasts. Each of these fifteen Vrygrond kitchens served between 300 and almost 2,300 meals per week. In total, the fifteen kitchens were serving about 13,000 meals per week. Two members of the Muizenberg CAN – Paul Weinberg and Stephen Schmidt – made a stunning short video, [‘Side by Side’](#).

In Bonteheuwel, the local Development Forum [organised](#) a soup kitchen in each of the 17 blocks in Bonteheuwel. In OceanView, there was almost a kitchen on every street. These were supported by CANs in middle class neighbourhoods. The Delft Action Network (DAN) ran a network of 41 community kitchens.



*Figure 1: Volunteer soup kitchens in Delft (left) and Kuilsrivier (right); photos by Tariro Washinyira for GroundUp.*

Many grass-roots initiatives were supported also by existing organisations. In Delft, for example, a local family had run a soup kitchen since 1994 (according to a [report by Tariro Washinyira](#)). Under the lockdown, with support from Breadline Africa, they expanded their operation. With 24 volunteers, they fed about 700 children per day, as well as 176 elderly people and about 300 other adults, throughout the Delft area. Organiser Farida Ryklief told Washinyira:

People here are in deep poverty. I have stayed up at night to help them apply for the Covid- relief grant on my laptop. ... Most of them don't own smartphones. They got SMSes to say they qualify for the R350 Covid-19 relief grant but nothing is happening. Children who were standing in the queue hadn't eaten since morning. They don't want to

move away from the centre for fear their parents will take their food. They would rather sit here and go back with empty containers. Some of them come barefoot, and I provide them with toiletries. Last week it was very cold and raining but some children came without jackets and were barefooted so I have started to appeal for old clothes donations.

Washinyira also spoke to Marion Wagner of Breadline Africa, which helps to fund soup kitchens in Delft and elsewhere: ‘We are facing a humanitarian issue like never before ... We are getting demands every day from feeding kitchens that have run out of stock and people who desperately need food.’ Prior to the lockdown, Breadline Africa paid for 14,000 meals at 27 sites, mostly in Cape Town. Under the lockdown, the operation expanded to 59,000 meals per week, and even then was not keeping up with the need. Wagner told Washinyara:

I just came from an informal settlement near Macassar village now. There are hundreds of children with no shoes and no warm clothing. They are all standing in muddy water. There are water puddles everywhere. Two men who are running the kitchen are cooking for 200 every day, for not just the informal settlement but for all around ...

These structures were not limited to Cape Town, although the network of CANs in Cape Town does seem to have been unusual. In Alexandra (Johannesburg), volunteers for Londani Lushaka (‘Caring for the Nation’) prepared and served up hot lunches to children, who brought containers with them. The food was donated by companies. A moving report [by Mark Heywood](#) drew attention to their need for larger pots so that they could cook more food for more poor children.

## **7. Emergency food parcel programmes have not filled the gaps**

How did the delivery of food – through parcels and meals – under the first three months of the lockdown compare with what would have been delivered ordinarily?

In a normal three-month period, mostly comprising school term, the volume of food funded by government would amount to about 35,000 food parcels or vouchers per month (through the SASSA-run Social Relief of Distress scheme) together with 9.6 million school meals daily and a minimum of 700,000 ECD centre meals daily.

How do we compare meals and parcels? Food parcels distributed in Gauteng during the lockdown had a retail value of about R500, according to research by

[Vermeulen, Muller and Schönfeldt](#). The parcels contained enough staple food and oil for a family of four people for two weeks, but enough protein-source foods for only 1.5 weeks. The food parcels were also found to be deficient in relation to items such as dairy, eggs, fruits and vegetables. [AfricaCheck](#) also found that these food parcels were deficient in key nutrients and provided only sufficient calories for two people for one month. The official food parcel approved by the Department of Social Development might ordinarily be a little larger than the Gauteng lockdown parcel, as we saw above. At most it provides for one (poor) meal per day for a family of four for one month. Overall, it seems unlikely that food parcels provide the equivalent of more than 120 meals.

In an ordinary three-month period, comprising at least ten if not twelve school weeks, the total volume of meal-equivalents that are ordinarily provided by the government is the total of:

- Food parcels (SASSA, Social Relief of Distress):  $35,000 \times 120 \times 3 = 12.6$  million meal-equivalents
- School meals: a minimum of 9.6 million  $\times$  5 days/week  $\times$  10 weeks = a minimum of 480 million meals
- ECD centre meals: a minimum of 700,000  $\times$  5 days/week  $\times$  12 weeks = 42 million meals
- CNDC meals: approximately 300,000 per week  $\times$  12 weeks = 3.6 million meals

This gives a total of less than 540 million meals or meal-equivalents (i.e. the equivalent of 4.5 million food parcels). Note that this does not count any of the food ordinarily provided by civil society.

How much food was delivered by national government in the first three months of the lockdown?

- Food parcels (by SASSA, Social Relief of Distress): 105,000
- School and CDE meals: None
- CNDC meals: None

This gives a total of only 105,000 parcels, which is precisely what SASSA would have distributed ordinarily over three months. At 120 meals/parcel, this is the equivalent of less than 13 million meals. It amounts to a negligible 2 percent of the total volume of food that would ordinarily be distributed by national government over three months.

To conclude that the national government has failed to feed the poor is a massive understatement.

Suppose we add in an estimate for the total volume of food distributed by civil society, together with provincial and local government. The data provided by the national Department of Social Development suggests that a total of just over

1 million food parcels was distributed over three months. This clearly does not count fully the parcels distributed in some provinces. It seriously undercounts distribution in the Western Cape and appears to undercount distribution in the Eastern Cape. I propose the generous assumption that the actual distribution was 50 percent higher than reported officially. If we add in the school, ECD and other meals provided, again probably much more so in the Western Cape than elsewhere, then we should add several million meals into the picture. Given that a parcel is the equivalent of just over 100 meals, this makes little difference to the overall calculation. To be generous, let's assume that the total volume of food distributed during the three months of lockdown was 2 million food parcels (i.e. about 240 million meal-equivalents). This corresponds to just one-sixth of the total volume of food distributed ordinarily over a three month period.

Finally, the volume of food distributed was also tiny compared to the overall need, i.e. comprising (a) the gap left by the suspension of existing schemes, (b) the pre-lockdown food security deficit and (c) the additional need due to the lockdown itself. The first of these would require the equivalent of 4.5 million food parcels. The second – targeted only at households with severely inadequate access to food prior to the lockdown – would require an additional 6 million parcels (i.e. 2 parcels per month for 3 months for 1 million households). The third would require the same again. Note that this targets only the poorest 2 million households with food parcels and does not reach even one half of the population estimated to be food insecure under the lockdown. Despite this, the total would come to 16.5 million food parcels, i.e. at least eight times what was actually distributed by civil society and all levels of government over the first three months of the lockdown.

To be fair, the national government did pay out substantial sums through the extension of unemployment insurance and supplements to existing social grants, although people only received the latter after six weeks of lockdown and suspension of feeding schemes. The national government failed, however, to roll out at scale its promised special Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress grant (see Seekings, 2020b).

In sum, the national government failed to feed the poor, primarily because it suspended its massive school and ECD feeding schemes. Civil society and some provincial and local governments stepped into the gap. This has made a huge difference for some poor families – but even in the Western Cape it has failed to fill more than a fraction of the gap left by the suspension of national feeding schemes. In total, emergency food parcels and feeding schemes have provided only a tiny fraction of the food that would have been provided ordinarily. They have made only a small contribution to addressing hunger under the lockdown.

## 8. The national government versus civil society

The distribution of food during the lockdown led to conflict between the national government (and some of the provincial governments also controlled by the African National Congress), on the one side, and civil society (and the Western Cape provincial government), on the other.

The lockdown exposed the commandist instincts of sections of the ANC and national government. This was evident in the name of the National (Coronavirus) Command Council, Minister of Police Cele's militaristic instructions to the police to criminalise minor infringements of lockdown regulations, Minister of Trade and Industry Patel's micro-regulation of business and Minister Dlamini-Zulu's obsession with smoking. It is mirrored also in the Minister of Social Development's attempts to control the distribution of food.

The Minister and her officials prefer to speak of 'co-ordination' than control, but the draft regulations circulated in May (dated 7 May) revealed executive over-reach. Citing long queues of people when food parcels were distributed – perhaps with the recent case of [Olievenhoutbosch](#) (near Pretoria) in mind – the government proposed that non-profit organisations and other civil society organisations must apply for permits from the Department of Social Development before they can distribute food parcels. Applications for permits would need to state precisely what would be distributed (i.e. the contents of each parcel), and when and where distribution would take place. These details would also need to be provided to the police. Organisations would have to collect personal details from every recipient and report these to the national Department. Parcels would need to be delivered to recipients' homes. The draft regulations explicitly prohibited cooked meals.

Several provincial governments appear to have issued these regulations and tried to enforce them. In Gauteng, the ANC-controlled provincial government reportedly tried to shut down a charitable organisation providing [peanut butter sandwiches](#) to poor communities. The media have [reported](#) that one or other part of the state had closed down soup kitchens, caused donated food to sit in storage unused, and generally tied up feeding operations in red tape. Newspapers continued to bemoan bureaucratic obstructionism. As [Business Day](#) wrote:

There is food, and there are organisations willing and able to distribute it, but an obstructive government is tying people's hands. Soup kitchens have been told they [can't serve hot food](#) because of the lockdown regulations; when they make sandwiches, they're told they need permits – and that they have to deliver the sandwiches. Food parcels have languished at distribution points because they don't meet the SA Social



Security Agency “quantity requirements”. It’s not just government’s determination to centralise control that is so infuriating; it’s the fact that it seems unable to ensure efficient delivery in the areas where it exercises that control.

The ANC-controlled provincial government in KwaZulu-Natal also moved to regulate civil society organisations.

The regulations promoted strong [protests](#) from the government of the Western Cape (run by the opposition Democratic Alliance). The Western Cape government later [explained](#) that the proposal to issue permits

would be virtually impossible to implement, since there are tens of thousands of organisations and private individuals in neighbourhoods in every province of this country, and provincial departments do not have the capacity to issue permits to every one of these organisations and individuals, or to co-ordinate them as contemplated in the draft directives.

The proposal was likely to lead to delays in food distribution. The provincial government also worried that the police would ‘take a hard line against individuals without permits, as they have done so thus far with people perceived to be in violation of exercising regulations, cigarette bans, and curfews’ – which would distract the police from the most important task of managing crowds. The South African Human Rights Commission declared that the [draft regulations violated the national constitution](#). Faced with widespread protests and legal action, the national Minister and her provincial counterpart in Gauteng appear to have backed away from confrontation.

The Minister of Social Development, Lindiwe Zulu, denies that the government tried to stop civil society from delivery of food. But she has repeatedly drawn attention to the [problems](#) of ‘selfish’ people who take multiple parcels or sell the food they have been given and the generally chaotic and uncoordinated distribution of parcels. Both the Minister and her Acting Director-General emphasise that a ‘developmental approach’ was needed, invoking the ANC’s long-standing anxiety about ‘handouts’ to the poor.

The DA (together with a non-profit organisation, the 1000 Women Trust) took its case to the High Court, which instructed the national government not to prevent the distribution of food whilst the case was being considered. The national Department nonetheless published a new set of regulations. The DA succeeded in blocking these also, on the [23<sup>rd</sup> of June](#).

Whilst the DA did succeed in its resistance to the regulations, the DA made poor use of parliament to hold the ANC to account. DA Member of Parliament were not very forceful in meetings of the Portfolio Committee.

It was left to civil society to contest strongly the school feeding issue. In June, as we saw above, the civil society organisation Equal Education took the national Department of Basic Education (and provincial education departments) to court, seeking an order that the NSNP be resumed (Equal Education, 2020).

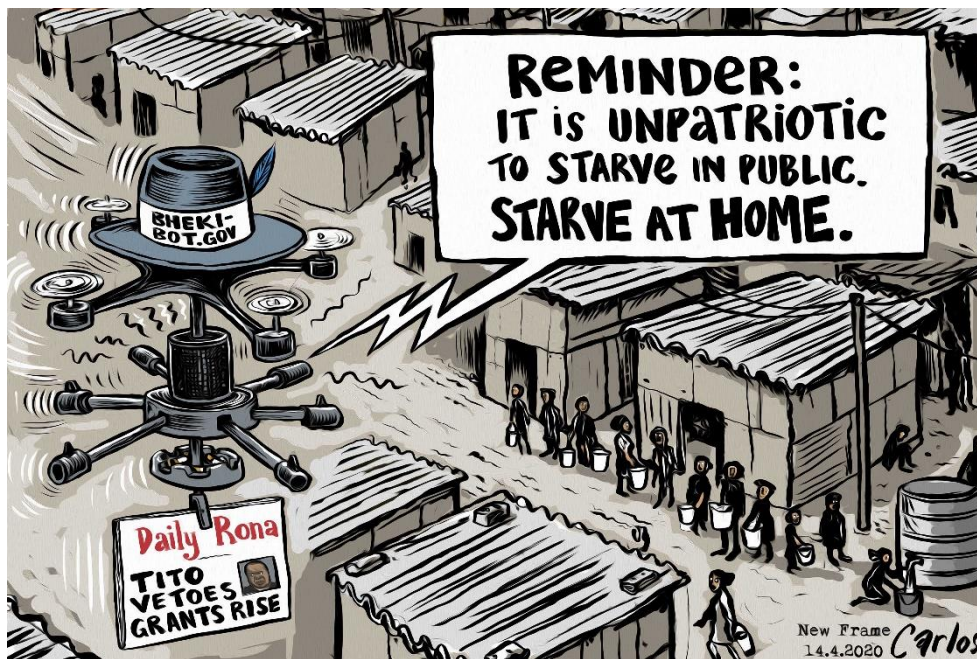
The Director-General of the Department of Basic Education [replied in court papers](#) that the NSNP had in fact resumed for all children on 22<sup>nd</sup> June. Equal Education quickly contacted 45 schools in Limpopo. At none of these schools had the NSNP resumed fully. It had either resumed in part or not at all. In other provinces, only some schools had fully resumed the NSNP. The case heard in the North Gauteng High Court on 2<sup>nd</sup> July. The court reserved judgement.

Three days later, on 5<sup>th</sup> July, the Minister of Basic Education [briefed the press](#). She stated that school meals had been resumed for all grade 7 and grade 12 students who had already returned to school, in all nine provinces. She added:

Now we have even expanded feeding to learners who are not yet back in schools. Plans are in place to provide feeding to learners not yet in school using different options, including staggered feeding at school, cooked food collected at school, food parcels collected at school, parcels collected at collection point other than school.

## 9. Conclusion

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the national government had no plan, shut down its massive school feeding programme and impeded its regular food parcel scheme, failed to provide much funding for food parcels and played almost no part in delivering them to the poor during the first three months of the lockdown. Political cartoonist Carlos seems to have captured the moment in his cartoon (below).<sup>12</sup>



Any such conclusion is, of course, politically very sensitive. When the President of the Medical Research Council, Glenda Gray, expressed her concern that child malnutrition was worsening under the lockdown, [she was fiercely rebuked by the Minister of Health](#). Whether or not more cases of child malnutrition were appearing at hospitals, it was very likely that child malnutrition was indeed worsening around the country.

The national government might point to the cash that it transferred funds to poor households through the expansion of social grants. At the beginning of both May and June, SASSA did indeed pay out close to R5 billion in supplements to its

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<sup>12</sup> Copyright Carlos Amato 2020 ([www.carlosamato.work](http://www.carlosamato.work)). The hat on the police drone belongs to Minister of Police Bheki Cele, who had remilitarized the police and repeatedly employed military metaphors during the lockdown. Carlos is mistaken in one respect: The Finance Minister (Tito Mboweni) did not veto increased spending on social grants. The presidential announcement on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April indicated that the equivalent of 1% of GDP would be spent on supplements to social grants and a temporary new grant, with the same again being allocated to the extension of unemployment insurance.

usual grants. This dwarfs the total value of food parcels delivered countrywide: One million food parcels are worth approximately R1 billion. But SASSA has failed spectacularly to deliver the promised emergency ‘Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress’ grant to adults with no other source of income (Seekings, 2020b).

Food parcels have been needed urgently under the lockdown by households with no other income, by households that needed to supplement existing grants, by households that were waiting for grant payments and by households that relied in part on school meals provided to children. The national government has failed these many households.

It was left to civil society to attempt to fill the gap left by the national government’s ineptitude and disinterest. Diverse civil society organisations – and many individuals – donated money or time to mount a colossal feeding operation. As the pandemic continues, or worsens, civil society faces difficult decisions on how to proceed, taking into account not only growing needs but also fatigue on the part of volunteers (as described by [Hamann](#)). In the past, surges of civil society activism have typically dissipated when the state stepped up its delivery and elected councillors stepped forward as representatives of poor and other neighbourhoods. In the current context, with state incapacity likely to persist and few signs of councillors stepping forward, might civil society assume a more permanent role?

Equal Education’s use of the courts to compel the national government to reopen its school feeding schemes reminds us that it is the state that has the capacity – in terms of infrastructure as well as resources – to provide food on a large scale. However permanent a role that civil society assumes with respect to feeding schemes, it is extremely unlikely that it could in the foreseeable future organize the provision of food on the scale of the NSNP, i.e. almost 10 million meals daily across the whole of South Africa. Civil society partnerships between richer and poorer neighbourhoods might help to build a better society. But countries like South Africa also need to improve the performance of the state itself, including through sustained pressure from civil society.

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