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Connect, communicate, collaborate: How to mitigate a food crisis

Collaboration has been a key theme emerging in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, but there have been few instances of multistakeholder cooperation on a large scale. The NGO-Government Food Forum in the Western Cape (formerly the Food Relief Forum) is an example of one such bold initiative, which initially focused on coordinating the provision of food aid in the province but has since expanded its mandate with the aim of achieving long-term food security.

South Africa has a long history of emergency feeding schemes, with school feeding schemes first introduced in the early twentieth century. From the 1950s onwards, when the National Party withdrew funding for feeding schemes, it was civil society that stepped into the breach.[1] The National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) was introduced in 1994 to reduce hunger and combat malnutrition among schoolchildren. This programme feeds more than nine million learners every day, so its suspension during the initial Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020 led to an unprecedented hunger crisis. This was compounded when the country recorded 2.2 million job losses between April and June 2020.



Clement Mohale – 'From nature we take and to nature we give'

Wave 5 National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey research shows that around 35% of households ran out of money during the March 2020 lockdown. Around 17% of respondents in the survey reported household hunger, while 14% reported child hunger.[2]

What made the Western Cape slightly different to other provinces was the fact that school feeding continued with assistance from the Peninsula School Feeding Association (read our case study 'When the National School Nutrition Programme came to a halt' on page 121). However, three months into the pandemic, after engaging with civil society groups, the Western Cape Economic Development Partnership (EDP) – an independent non-profit that works with a range of partners to improve the performance of the Cape Town and Western Cape socioeconomic development system – submitted a report to the Western Cape Government pointing out that 89% of non-profit organisations (NPOs) were experiencing an increase in requests for food. Some 70% were experiencing dwindling resources due to donor and volunteer fatigue. Although there was not much quantitative data to present, there was enough evidence for government to mobilise resources to various organisations and community kitchens.

"We didn't just try to quantify the hunger crisis – we tried to do something about it," explained Andrew Boraine, Chief Executive of the EDP. "We tried to illustrate the need by telling people's stories and connecting government to what was happening on the ground."

Evolving areas of focus of the Food Forum

Phase 1 – Connecting, communicating, and collaborating

- In April 2020, the Food Relief Forum, convened in response to the pandemic, focused on immediate relief, looking at how to map efforts, identifying any gaps, addressing practical issues like acquiring permits for food distribution, licensing community kitchens, and the safe storage and transportation of food.
- The Service Dining Rooms, which have fed homeless people in central Cape Town since 1935, produced a Standard Operating Practice document on how to operate a food relief programme in a compliant fashion.

Phase 2 – Food relief data gathering and analysis

- The Western Cape Government and the City of Cape Town shared their food relief data with the Food Relief Forum, and provided information about non-food relief like the special Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress grant, the distribution of masks, and the strategy for Covid-19 'hotspot' areas.
- A food distribution website was created to generate an overall sense of the need for food and how much of the need was being met by civil society organisations. This was put together by volunteers headed by U-turn Homeless Ministries.
- Survey research and data science company ikapadata volunteered to assist the Food Relief Forum in collecting data, engaging directly with 18 larger intermediary food networks that had the capacity to keep spreadsheets and track bulk distribution – obviating the need to disrupt the on-the-ground activities of hundreds of grassroots organisations.
- A food data report published in June 2020 showed civil society had collectively distributed a total of 3 080 998 'people days' – a unit that measures quantities of food as the number of days they would feed a single adult (different from the total number of people fed). An updated report published in September 2020 showed that food relief mobilisation amounted to 5 212 402 'people days'.

Phase 3 – Hunger is growing, emergency food aid is dwindling

- By July 2020, with the shift from total lockdown to partial lockdown, the Food Relief Forum shifted from crisis to recovery mode, as schools and universities started to reopen. Despite this, food relief in poor and vulnerable communities remained a central issue.
- Continued social relief was rolled out through the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) special Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress grant and school feeding schemes rather than food parcels. Food relief was a last resort rather than a programme of government.
- By the end of June 2020, 89% of NPOs reported that food needs were growing, while 70% reported that resources were declining.
- The Food Relief Forum released a report in mid-July titled 'Hunger is growing, emergency food aid is dwindling', based on evidence provided by civil society organisations.

Phase 4 – Transitioning from food aid to food security

- There was increasing food insecurity due to shrinking government finances, donor and volunteer fatigue, rising community infections, winter flooding in informal settlements, disruptions to basic food supplies, and disruptions to municipal services among other reasons.
- The Food Relief Forum rebranded as the Food Forum and began to focus on food security and better nutritional outcomes as part of 'building back better'. This included liaising with policymakers as well as focusing on promoting 'Local production for local consumption', or shortening the food supply chain.

Building trust

The EDP had no background in the food and nutrition sector prior to the pandemic, but one of its core functions was bringing stakeholders together. It leveraged a slogan that had been useful during the Cape Town drought crisis – 'Connect, communicate, collaborate' – to rally stakeholders to work together despite physical distancing, share accurate and relevant information, and join forces to tackle the unprecedented food crisis. "That was our starting point," said Boraine, who pointed out that the initiative began by connecting with larger, more formal non-profit organisations. "There are so many NPOs whose business it was to provide food relief before the pandemic, so it was logical to work with them."

The EDP also reached out to civil society and grassroots organisations, including those with no food relief background, and community action networks (CANs) that were setting up their own community kitchens (read the case study 'Community action networks – a coordinated pandemic response' on page 119).

Marcela Guerrero Casas, a Programme Lead at the EDP, who was involved with CANs, said the EDP facilitated conversations between government and informal organisations. "CANs met with some resistance from government because their community kitchens were not registered, for example, but the EDP brokered a relationship between the parties and this led to government supplying funding for some of the less formal initiatives," she pointed out.

Intermediary organisations and networks were also drawn into the collective because of their links to donors, farmers, businesses and citizens who were eager to assist. This included the likes of Ladles of Love, an NPO that supplied thousands of tonnes of bulk food to community kitchens, as well as Ikamva Labantu and Rotary Clubs, which gathered resources and channelled these to grassroots organisations.

The EDP provided the link between the differentiated set of approximately 75 intermediary and grassroots civil society organisations active in the Food Forum and the Western Cape Government's Humanitarian Cluster Committee, which included eight provincial departments, the City of Cape Town, five District Municipalities and SASSA.

"This wasn't the first time the EDP had put a 'whole-of-society' effort together," Boraine explained. "We do this for all our projects as it's part of our methodology, pandemic or no pandemic." He said a key lesson was that those who had prior relationships with one another were able to respond better to the crisis. "Relationships of trust matter. Building community or city resilience is about building relationships into every development programme – not just during a crisis, but before and after it," he asserted.

Jenny Soderbergh, a member of the UCT GSB MPhil in Inclusive Innovation 2020 cohort, is researching social innovation that emerged in Cape Town during the Covid-19 crisis. She pointed out that the EDP's way of convening meetings to broker better relationships between government and civil society was refreshingly non-hierarchical. "Part of building trust was about coming down to the people level, using first names instead of referring to titles and departments," she said.

While no business chambers or organisations joined the Food Relief Forum, intermediaries sourced cash and food donations from farmers and big companies, channelling these to grassroots distribution points. The Brewers Soup Collective, a non-profit consisting of breweries in South Africa, repurposed their brewery equipment to produce food for vulnerable communities, and chefs that had recently gone out of business gave of their time to make frozen soups. Business therefore played an indirect yet integral role in serving communities during the crisis.

Learning from 'stepping into action'

With so many new and unknown variables in a pandemic, an adaptive management approach seemed to make the most sense. "We stepped into action together without setting rules, or having a detailed plan beyond agreeing that we would be cooperative and adaptive," Boraine said. "Our first role was quite modest – we set out to find out if we could get accurate information about things like permits, lockdown regulations and so on – and we found out who in government could assist us."

Interestingly, some large food NPOs were the first organisations to drop out of the Food Relief Forum, as they tend to compete for donors. However, grassroots organisations and intermediaries were eager to embrace change and work together – for example, they were willing to make the shift from distributing food parcels to food vouchers. "We quickly realised that food parcels can be a problem – they are cumbersome, often contested at a community level, not very nutritious and open to being hijacked," Boraine pointed out. "Digital vouchers – a simple system that works with informality – provide you with a direct line of sight between people and resources and enable you to fund collective efforts, like a community kitchen serving 200 people three times a week, rather than trying to feed households below the breadline, where you need a means test and have to be registered."

Going beyond food aid

The Food Relief Forum acknowledged that providing food aid would not be sustainable in the long term. In consultation with stakeholders, the Forum began to shift its focus from food aid to food security. This meant reaching out to food policy and research networks to discuss addressing systemic issues that had been present before the pandemic. "These conversations added a new dimension to what we were doing because we didn't necessarily have the language to discuss the big system changes required before then," Boraine explained. "Involving these stakeholders lent more depth to the discussions, which hadn't been possible during the first six months of the pandemic."

The Food Relief Forum evolved into the Food Forum and came up with the slogan 'Local production for local consumption' to articulate its focus on putting producers in touch with consumers, shortening food supply chains, and potentially changing consumer behaviour. It also made the deliberate choice to link food production, processing, distribution, and consumption to nutrition. "People in poor communities often don't have access to fresh, nutritious food, which is why 27% of South African children under five are stunted," Boraine said,

indicating that the Food Forum will reach out to organisations that have not been part of the process to date, including small-scale farmers, micro food processors, and informal traders who supply about 60% of fresh produce to townships.

The Food Forum is focusing on whether the theme of local production for local consumption will resonate with food system stakeholders, and whether more of them can be drawn in to make the initiative a success. "We don't want to compete with anyone and this is why we are working closely with other existing food networks such as the Food Growers Initiative, the South African Urban Food & Farming Trust, the African Centre for Cities, the Southern Africa Food Lab, ICLEI, the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security, the City of Cape Town's Food Security working group, as well as grassroots community organisations to explore next steps," Boraine said.

The Forum continues to play a coordinating role, sharing information and encouraging collaboration. Although the private sector is welcome to get involved, Boraine pointed out that some companies are "part of the problem rather than the solution" when it comes to their role in the food system, like investing in and promoting highly packaged and processed food with low nutritional value. However, companies can and do play a positive role – a good example being the V&A Waterfront, which has a food hub that focuses on creating shorter food chains and educating both the 80 food establishments on its premises, as well as consumers. "The Waterfront has joined the Food Forum and will play a key role in opening up a dialogue with private-sector business in their precinct," Boraine said.

A key lesson emerging from the crisis is that "partnering is a verb while partnership is a noun. The former denotes action, while the latter entails a structure," Boraine said, adding that people get bogged down by structures, sometimes spending months deciding who will fill which position, and which rules and protocols should apply. "We don't know what the Food Forum will look like in future, but we have learnt that you should step into action first and create an uncomplicated governance structure to support your actions," he asserted.

A new approach to food security in the Western Cape?

The Food Forum has introduced a new collaborative approach for addressing both food relief and food security – but has it altered the Western Cape's approach to food system change? "Yes and no," Boraine said. "The pandemic has put food and nutrition issues on the political table." For example, the recently launched Western Cape Government Nourish to Flourish programme will attempt to make the province more resilient by addressing the triple burden of undernutrition (underweight, stunting, and wasting), overweight and obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies, preferably collaborating with non-government actors, the private sector and other spheres of government to strengthen its capability. "However", Boraine said, "too many government departments and municipalities still take a narrow approach to food security by claiming that it is not in their mandates to get involved. This needs to change, as the failures in the food system in South Africa are everyone's business."

Government and civil society organisations in the food sector have worked better during the crisis than at any other time in recent history, partly due to the relationship-building efforts of the Food Relief Forum. During September 2020, CSO Forum members were asked to provide feedback on the impact of the Food Relief Forum, with some 93% saying they would like to continue to collaborate with organisations or government officials who were members. Interestingly, 85% said they had connected with organisations they hadn't worked with before, 67% had connected with government in a new way, and 78% derived a better understanding of government's plans, processes, and responses.

While this is valuable, challenges remain – for example, South Africa has no clear food and nutrition system policy and the landscape is fragmented, contradictory and contested, according to Boraine. "Food policy wasn't on the agenda of local government or the province prior to the pandemic, and national government had sidelined it as part of its rural, agricultural mandate," Boraine pointed out. "Our job is to argue for a more coherent approach that will put everyone on the same page, with a common agenda that can lead to joint action."

Importantly, this involves the entire country, rather than just one province. "The EDP is committed to making lessons from the Western Cape available to other provinces via national coordination structures – we play an intermediary role and not a political one," Boraine explained, adding that everything it undertakes is outward-facing rather than parochial. ■

What made the Forum work?

- Regular engagement – weekly meetings were held at the height of the crisis, then every two weeks thereafter, always on time and at the same time.
- Co-creation – each meeting was preceded with a shared agenda and concluded with a full report.
- Action-orientated – the focus was on 'doing' rather than 'debating'.
- Adaptive approach – things change quickly during a crisis, so members were encouraged to 'step into action' and not wait for the perfect plan or data.
- Accountability – there was regular communication about participants delivering on actions or providing solutions to issues raised.
- Maintaining contacts – the database of participants was updated regularly and distributed after each meeting.
- Decentralised – participants had direct contact details of those who could assist them, enabling them to work in direct partnership.