

WILLIAM GUMEDE: Civil society and NPOs must get Covid-19 funding

Besides employing a huge number of people, these organisations aid social stability, community coherence and service delivery

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This includes full-time, casual and volunteer staff. Almost 80% of the workforce are black and more than 60% of the leadership and management are women.

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A report to parliament's finance standing committee in 2002 already noted that the civil society sector employed more people than construction, transport and financial services. A collapse because of lack of funding will therefore add substantially to unemployment levels. Some, such as the Johannesburg Child Welfare Society, National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Reintegration of Offenders, and Cotlands, provide essential basic services that the state would ordinarily be expected to provide.

Without the civil society organisations providing such public services, SA's service delivery crises

would be considerably worse, with more violent protests and disruption. In fact, these

organisations will be crucial to help the state deliver its R500bn emergency economic stimulus, whether helping with food distribution, getting Covid-19 social grants to the unemployed, or helping women and children who face violence and abuse during the lockdown.

They are also crucial for monitoring corruption, mismanagement and waste of the R500bn stimulus, which past experience shows could easily be derailed by corruption, inefficiency and poor execution.

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Given that SA is a failing state in many areas, especially at the local level, these organisations are crucial in providing social capital to poor citizens; building supporting networks between people in broken communities; helping them access resources, knowledge and information; and building a sense of community when the state has failed, the rule of law has broken down and people have lost trust in formal institutions.

An extraordinarily high level of inequality in SA means society is fractured along race, gender and class divides, which generates exclusion, distrust and conflict between communities. The Covid-19 lockdown has been disproportionately hard on the poor, the unemployed and the informal sector, putting the country at great risk of major social unrest unless people get food, emergency income and social support over the period of the lockdown and afterwards.

SA's civil society organisations have been vital in strengthening social cohesion, building social bonds between potentially disaffected people, and getting them to co-operate with each other. They are crucial to fostering a sense of social solidarity, mutual self-help and dignity among the poor, when inequalities may otherwise result in a ruthless battle for individual survival. Social cohesion is the extent to which people are co-operative, within and across boundaries, without coercion or purely self-interested motivation.

Civil society organisations also soak up a large number of young volunteers, especially black youth, moulding young people in ways that are productive and supportive of democracy, social justice and caring for others, so providing a positive outlet for restless energy that may have otherwise go into gangsterism, populism and extremist politics.

Corruption and mismanagement

Close to a third of civil society organisations in SA get some form of funding from the government. Corruption, mismanagement and indifference on the part of officials in recent years, particularly at the department of social development, have meant such government funding has almost never arrived on time, or has been reduced or stopped altogether, with many civil society organisations having to reduce their offerings or close altogether.

A majority of such organisations have had to turn to foreign sources of development aid from the developed world. Yet after the 2007/2008 global financial crisis, many industrialised countries started to cut their development aid, and SA civil society organisations saw their funding drying up. The rise of ultra-nationalist and populist governments in the West has also resulted in foreign development budgets being slashed, with politicians saying they do not want to send taxpayer money to “corrupt” African and developing countries.

This has further diminished funding. Sadly, the devastating economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will likely lead to further reductions in foreign aid as governments focus on domestic post-coronavirus rebuilding.

All of this points in the same direction: during this perilous time of Covid-19, when SA civil society organisations need funding more than ever to keep jobs, public services and social justice programmes afloat, that funding will be in shorter supply than ever. The government should put in place a dedicated Covid-19 emergency fund for these organisations, and invite large corporates and wealthy individuals to either donate towards such a fund or set up their own dedicated funds.

International organisations such as the World Bank must also provide emergency civil society funding, not only for SA but for those across Africa and other developing countries. Current funding from the government to specific civil society organisations must continue uninterrupted, and even increased.

Failing to secure funding for its civil society organisations to help them stay afloat as employers, public-service providers and social-stability enablers will not only cause increased unemployment but may lead to public-service delivery collapse, community breakdowns and social unrest.

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