# The role of Community Based Organisations during Covid-19 lockdown

## Summary

This policy brief draws on the experience of two community based organisations (CBOs) that were actively involved in supporting low income neighbourhoods during lockdown in 2020 and 2021. We asked them, and local residents, about how they responded to the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. The Politics and Urban Governance Research Group (PUG) draws on these responses to provide insights into how residents in vulnerable areas can be supported during a crisis.

## Case Studies

The project documented experiences of CBOs' pandemic responses in three key areas: food, care and digital inclusion. We identified two CBOs in low-income neighbourhoods that had supported a wider group of residents during lockdown.

1. **Sakhisizwe Youth Development Program** is based in Imizamo Yethu, Hout Bay. It offers mentorship, academic support and leadership support to over 100 young people (13-25 years) from Imizamo Yethu. Its mission is to empower and develop young people through a holistic approach, helping them stay in school and graduate.

2. **Reclaim The City: Cissie Gool House (CGH)** formed as a response to the consequences of gentrification in Cape Town. CGH houses over 1000 residents in an illegal occupation of the Old Woodstock Hospital. It is part of a movement positioned against two three challenges: a) the sale of well-located public land within the city, b) the evictions of long-term residents from well-located areas and c)homelessness.



*Informal Settlements in IY, Credit: Mfundo Majola*

## Methods

Information was collected through a) reflective interviews with CBO staff and residents in the low-income neighbourhoods; b) focus groups with recipients of support from both CBOs; c) weekly digital diaries with ten participants, either working with, or residing near the CBOs, over a 3 month period; d) documentary analysis to compile a living archive of CBOs' pandemic response, including public-facing/internal material (e.g. leaflets, electronic communications, press coverage, grey literature); e) mapping key stakeholders and spatial elements in pandemic response.

## Context

Respondents in our case studies felt that the national government responded appropriately to Covid-19 at first, creating an impression that the pandemic was being taken seriously and the government had a plan.

> *"I personally feel that the government reacted very quickly according to the pandemic. It wasn't easy for us but they managed it very fast. They were able to have a solution and what to do,"* - Yolanda, CGH

Soon those living in the low-income areas around CGH and Sakhisizwe experienced the harsh consequences of a full lockdown. These were most notable in relation to **restrictions on movement**. Key issues attributed to restricted movement:

a) the inability to secure an income. Many in the formal workplace had suspended pay or were retrenched as workplaces (such as restaurants) were forced to shut down. Those in informal employment no longer had access to work opportunities.

b) Difficulty accessing basic needs (food, medicine, etc.). There were high levels of anxiety about leaving the home to shop or get other forms of support, due to a fear of police reprisals. There was also restricted access to transport which affected access to work and to fetching items such as medicine.

Although residents in our low-income neighbourhoods were restricted in accessing income and some basic needs, they noted support from the government during lockdown in two areas. First, local government largely continued to provide **basic services** such as water, electricity, sewerage and refuse removal,

although some residents in IY had limited refuse collection, water and sanitation. Second, national government continued to provide child welfare **grants** and pensions. The new Social Relief of Distress Grant (SRD) was well received, however there were challenges accessing this grant. None of our digital diarists received the SRD grant, although they knew others who had. They struggled proving their eligibility and/or grew tired of the lengthy processing times. This was particularly challenging for our respondents living in vulnerable circumstances.

For diarists like Milo from CGH who did not have consistent formal work but was deemed ineligible for the SRD, the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) assisted during the lockdown. However, Milo notes how compared to the SRD grant, it was 'very little' and took long to process and pay out as well. Across both neighbourhoods, many relied on non-governmental organizations, religious groups and other less formal donors during and after the lockdown to address the challenges of unemployment.

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## The Role of CBOs during lockdown

Our findings show that CBOs played a significant role in supporting vulnerable residents during lockdown. They were able to do so as they had built up **networks of trust** over several years, both with local residents in the areas in which they work, and with donors or external supporters.

CBOs provided support in four areas:
- food security
- care of youth and elderly
- safety and security
- information sharing

## 1. Food Security
In both neighbourhoods, CBO leaders made a proactive decision to work alongside donors in the management of food production and distribution, although they differed in approach.

### Cissie Gool House
At CGH, there was a large influx of donations during the lockdown. Some of the noted donors at CGH included Woodstock Residents Association, Woodstock Salt River Community Upliftment Projects, the Community Action Network (CAN), the Development Action Group (DAG), supermarkets like Shoprite and Woolworths and, on one occasion, from a governmental agency.

Donors also included local businesses, religious groups and individuals within the greater community of Woodstock and surrounding areas. Donations included both prepared foods, food parcels for household use and dry and uncooked food products to be used in the community's kitchen which would be prepared on site. All food would be distributed from the kitchen, with designated CBO leaders and members assigned to deliver food directly to different sections within the occupation. This was to prevent queueing and movement within the buildings which would threaten Covid-19 protocols.

If there was any surplus food, CGH would implement feeding schemes in surrounding neighbourhoods, such as the satellite kitchen, 'Boys in the Hood'. The CBO leaders were able to mediate conflict around food distribution:

> *"[T]he thing about food parcels is in the occupation, you have…single people. So, they would have access to the same size of food parcel as a family with five or six people. So, there was issues around the distribution of the food parcels…And what we tried to do to steer away from the food parcels, rather produce and distribute the production to everybody"* - Bevel Lucas, CGH Community Leader



*Food being prepared and packaged by CGH Kitchen Committee*

### Sakhisizwe Youth Development Programme
SYD, and its leader, were seen as trustworthy and reliable distributors of food donations in Imizamo Yethu. Through affiliations with organizations like 'Love in a Bowl,' a collective of individuals and organizations working to produce and supply organic and locally sourced vegetables in Hout Bay, Sakhisizwe was able to swiftly respond by mobilizing community members to assess the extent to which their assistance was required. According to the founder of Love in a Bowl, an estimated 90 tons of vegetables were collected every week during the lockdown through direct donations or through financial contributions which were used to negotiate the purchasing of food.

Received food would either be packaged for distribution directly to households in the form of parcels or in the form of prepared meals that were distributed in and by the community. Priority was given to children as part of strong affiliations with early childhood development (ECD) programs and with the elderly in Imizamo Yethu.

Sakhisizwe used a community centred approach to food donations that utilized expertise from women within the community (affectionately known as Mama's) to determine the quantity of food needed to be produced and distributed for households in Imizamo Yethu facing food insecurity. Love in Bowl describes the process as follows:

> "[Mhinti] would send me a list once a week of the number of households that were without food in IY and the Mamas that were responsible for that would actually go up and down their block, find out how many families needed the food, they would all report back…" - Founder, Love in a Bowl

Both CGH and SYDP tried, as far as possible, to implement a 'self-reliant' approach to food production that would ensure that much of the cooked food would be processed within the community in order to effectively manage distribution as well as to ensure that food provided met the dietary requirements of the residents (such as those in the Muslim community). Examples included a small vegetable garden in IY.

## 2.  Care

In both communities, the lockdown greatly affected resident's health on various levels, including physical health (with many contracting Covid-19) and mental health (including dealing with loss and isolation). We explored the concept of care along two dimensions: care for the youth and children, and care for the elderly.

### *Youth*

Across both CBOs there were existing practices supporting youth and child care. Sakhisizwe has a long-term coordinated approach as an organisation focussing on youth development. Both CBOs however house after school activities and various programs aimed at youth academic and psycho-social development.

At CGH there is a Youth and Child Monitor, an afterschool and a holiday youth program. This has a dedicated space and tutoring support from students at the nearby Westford High School. In the beginning of the lockdown the youth monitor facilitated Covid-19 awareness and maintained safety protocols. Unfortunately the CGH Youth Program had to stop all its activities as social distancing regulations were enforced. Consequently, this led to behavioural issues with children which was, in some cases, a cause for concern.

Sakhisizwe made a concerted effort to continue youth development during lockdown. Some of their programmes were limited and engagement happened through WhatsApp, however communication with parents and youth was continued during lockdown, which formed a support base for the community.

### *Elderly*

Both CBOs provided care for the elderly in their communities during and after the lockdown. At CGH, the feeding scheme prioritized the elderly and delivered food directly to their rooms in the occupation with special care observed in regards to Covid-19 safety protocols. CGH members would accompany the elderly, or go on their behalf, to fetch grants, groceries or medicine during the lockdown. Members of Sakhisizwe provided assistance at the 'Beli Beli Old Age Home'.

Our research shows how the lockdown affected how community members relate to the elderly. Our respondents were more mindful of the needs and threats to the elderly during the lockdown. As noted by Yolanda from CGH, *"We had put in our minds that Covid 19 was affecting mostly the older people so now we had that thing that they get sick quick so we don't want to be close to them because that they are older and they can get sick quickly"*. Some made efforts to keep away from the elderly, and others noted how the lockdown had improved the relationship in the household as the youth worked to protect them.

## 3.  Safety and Security

During the lockdown, there were a number of safety concerns within the communities in which the CBOs work. Some were linked to the pandemic, others related to crime and substance abuse. Many of our respondents noted that they do not feel safe in their neighbourhoods. While the lockdown did see a drop in the crime rates in South Africa overall, the high unemployment rate and challenges with poverty and food insecurity saw a rise in some types of crimes in the respective neighbourhoods in which the CBOs work.

To enhance safety CGH had always had in place a Safety and Security Task Team. During the lockdown, an additional specialized team monitored movement in and out of the occupation.

> "We had what we call Lockdown Monitoring of the income and exiting of people at our gates at night. And this was largely due to…what we call the Safety and Security task team led largely by women to monitor the movement of people at night." Bevel Lucas, Community leader at CGH

In addition to the Lockdown Monitoring team, the greater Woodstock community has a Neighbourhood Watch and a Community Policing Forum that works closely with members of CGH.

Sakhisizwe did not get directly involved in security provision, however they maintained a network of communication and support for members and in so doing enhanced vigilance and local knowledge that improved overall safety.

## 4. Digital inclusion

Lockdown compelled those who could to embrace digital technology for the purposes of education, communication and work. While it had opened avenues for skills development it also created a divide between those with and without access. The CBOs were able to mitigate this digital divide to a large extent. Social media platforms were preferred, specifically WhatsApp and Facebook. The use of digital communication by the CBOs also helped to mitigate feelings of isolation felt by some of their members.

Members of CGH used digital media to facilitate communication with loved ones, those within organizational structures as well as with affiliated organizations including the Neighbourhood Watch, Community Policy Forums and with other occupations affiliated to Reclaim the City. They also used digital platforms for educational purposes for both children and adults.

At Sakhisizwe, digital platforms were similarly used to communicate with loved ones, youth, parents, and with those within the organizational structures. As a staff member explained, "*During lockdown we mostly used WhatsApp, calls and FB, same as with community and for our program*" -  Tina, Sakhisizwe

Both CBOs played a key role in supporting virtual education. At CGH many residents individually engaged in teaching or the tutoring of children. Sakhisizwe used

WhatsApp to maintain its reading program, despite issues with data and lack of devices faced by some of its students.

> "We could send the link and say guys please do read this story. And then we will discuss it via WhatsApp, which was not 100% because some of the kids didn't have data and some didn't have phones. So that's why sometimes we also will send the message to the parents as well" – Staff, Sakhisizwe

In order to address some of the issues faced with access – including the cost of data -  members of both CGH and Sakhisizwe made use of face-to-face communication to supplement the digital engagement. CBO members made efforts to keep others, without access to technology, informed.

> "And so, there were moments where we had real challenges with regards to access to communicating as a result of not having data. But what we did is…have…what we at the time called 'Adopt a Buddy' meaning that you have to go and tell somebody about whatever news you received about whatever you've received. So that was an effective way of getting any message out to everyone" – Bevel Lucas, CGH Community Leader

## Challenges for CBOs and their members

### Role of Government

A key challenge for vulnerable residents during lockdown was a **lack of visibility** from government officials**.** Respondents, particularly in CGH, felt government was 'disconnected' and hiding behind the veil of 'social distancing'. Lack of visibility was seen to reflect poor levels of engagement in both neighbourhoods in a time where there had been a noted need for education on the response to the pandemic and some of the subsequent challenges they may face as a result of the lockdown.

### Food

CBOs were able to mitigate **food insecurity** during the lockdown, but this has now returned for residents. There has been a drastic decrease in food donations and networks built to support food security during the lockdown have weakened. One cause is a lack of funding in the NGO sector after lockdown, coupled with a rising cost of living. This raises questions around the sustainability of the CBOs' feeding schemes to mitigate food insecurity. Additionally, food security during lockdown does not equate to food sovereignty.

*"In lockdown it was so tough that we were, what's the word, we were living on other people. People who were donating food parcels and stuff and that's how you actually lived and it was so hard because you had nothing. […] We were like…dependent on people who could give"*- Yolanda, CGH Youth

## Limited resources

CBOs can only work with the resources they have available. A challenge to sustaining digital technology is ongoing loadshedding, a lack of data and a lack of devices. CBOs could not assist with tasks such as printing school or recreational material.

## Key Messages and Recommendations

- CBOs are embedded in the neighbourhoods in which they work and have established relationships of trust, both internally and externally. They are well placed to provide timely and effective support during a crisis.

- CBOs provided food security for vulnerable neighbourhoods.

- CBOs embraced digital technology during the pandemic which led to improved information sharing. Where residents did not have access to technology, they shared information face to face.

- Local government did not work effectively with CBOs during Covid-19 and lockdown.

- All spheres of government had information campaigns during Covid-19. However, these were often not visible to our respondents.

- Local government could work actively with embedded CBOs to disseminate information, and plan resource allocation, during a crisis.

- CBOs and those they support can become 'charity victims'. As a respondent noted, "*It was like Christmas*" in relation to food supplies from donors during lockdown. Food support could be matched with money to allow CBOs to allocate resources to where they know it is most needed. This would also support long term planning.

- The lockdown was an opportunity for skills development for CBOs and these should be nurtured moving forward, especially in the area of digital innovation.

## About the Research

This research was conducted by Fiona Anciano, Babongile Bidla and Boitemelo Papane from the University of the Western Cape. It forms part of an international comparative study into CBOs and social infrastructure during Covid-19. The international team includes Melanie Lombard from the University of Sheffield, United Kingdom, and Carlos Tobar from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Cali, Colombia. The research was funded by the Urban Studies Foundation.