



DSI-NRF  
Centre of Excellence  
in Food Security

POLICY BRIEF

**03**

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# CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS:

## CSOs SHOULD HAVE A CENTRAL ROLE IN FOOD GOVERNANCE

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*AUTHORS: Camilla Adelle, Florian Kroll, Jane Battersby, Gareth Haysom, Scott Drimie*



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## KEY MESSAGES

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1 Food insecurity is a long-standing problem, but the Covid-19 pandemic has brought it to the attention of all levels of government as well as the public.

2 A whole-of-government (and society) approach is needed to tackle this problem.

3 The critical role played by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) (and the limitations of government) should be recognised.

4 Government needs to work with CSOs to bring about systemic change in the food system, by:

- investing in strengthening relationships with (and between) CSOs;
- collecting and sharing information;
- shifting from 'participation' to 'partnering' to co-design of services and policies;
- supporting a more sustainable, user-specific, approach to food aid.

5 Civil society and other non-state actors also need to engage in different ways of working in inter-sectoral forums and networks in order to bring about structural change of the food system.

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## INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS AT STAKE?

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**F**ood insecurity has been a long-standing problem in South Africa, long before Covid-19 arrived. However, the pandemic and lockdown have deepened food poverty significantly, making it more visceral and eliciting greater critical attention about how the different spheres of state (national, provincial and local) are responding. Hunger and emergency food aid became a common topic of media articles in the first few months of lockdown, and continue to be a daily concern for many people and the CSOs that assist them.

While the government struggled to mobilise with the speed and scale necessary, one of the positives resulting from this crisis has been the response of civil society organising independently and almost instantaneously to feed people. At least 50% of the feeding in Western Cape in the first few months of lockdown came from CSOs.

Government is often thought to be wary of civil society, whom they sometimes see as unelected and therefore unaccountable. CSOs, and especially

social movements, can also be viewed as critical of government. At the same time, red tape and compliance-based thinking can make it seemingly impossible for government to channel public resources (e.g. grant funding, land and building leases) to CSOs that are not 'formalised' and 'registered' (WCED 2020). Even those CSOs that are registered, many operate on a skeleton staff and struggle with government's red tape and bureaucracy. As a result, CSOs at times prefer to work with other partners.

The Covid-19 crisis has created a new 'ecosystem' of CSOs (Hamann et al 2020) providing an unprecedented opportunity for government across all its spheres to work with these groups not only to provide ongoing food aid, but also to collaborate for long-term structural change towards a more just and sustainable food system. This will require pivoting from a purely emergency response to more systematic strategies that include valuing the knowledge and contributions of a wider group of CSOs, including those experienced in advocacy and community mobilisation.

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## BACKGROUND:

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**C**SOs can play an important role in governance, shaping policy and advocating for change. South Africa has an experienced and well-organised civil society born out of opposition to apartheid and in response to HIV/Aids. The right to food is enshrined in the Constitution. However, this right had not been specifically litigated until Equal Education and Section 27 in July 2020 brought a court case against the Department of Basic Education to reinstate the National School Nutrition Programme.

Prior to Covid, CSOs had kept a relatively low profile with regards to campaigning on the right to food and against high levels of food insecurity. The nature of food as a policy problem that cuts across multiple government departments, as well as spheres of government, makes it hard for CSOs to even know who to interact with in order to inform and shape policy. In turn, the lack of a consolidated food movement is thought to contribute to the low priority given by government to this social economic right.

Food as a policy issue is often thought of mainly from the production or agricultural perspective (i.e. how to grow more food). However, there is a momentum worldwide to adopt the food systems approach that brings consumption and production patterns together in a more holistic framework, which stretches from production, through transport and processing of food to consumption and ultimately waste management. In South Africa there is some state support of food production, particularly for commercial agriculture, but other initiatives consign food (security) to the realm of social protection.

Active steering and shaping (or governing), of the wholefood system by a variety of stakeholders is needed if it is to serve the needs of all people in South Africa. This steering process is known as food systems governance. CSOs can play a diverse and important set of roles in food system governance, beyond 'just' delivering emergency food aid. They can advocate for the food insecure and demand political action; hold governments to account for their (in) actions and responsibilities; cooperate in multi-stakeholder partnerships to tackle food insecurity; hold deep knowledge about the local food system through diverse involvement; and perform food and agriculture related education (Dubbels et al. 2020).



In the case of South Africa, CSOs have a particularly critical role in demanding government to fulfil its responsibility towards its citizens with regards to the right to food in the Constitution. CSOs are also ideally placed to contribute their local knowledge and unique understanding of the needs of the most vulnerable in society to inform inclusive policy making. This makes them ideally placed to be partners, not only for delivering services such as food aid, but also finding long-term solutions (including policy solutions) to complex societal issues such as food insecurity.

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## RESPONSES IN LOCKDOWN

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Even before lockdown started, the provincial and local government as well as civil society were aware of the food insecurity that would unfold, but struggled with the logistical issues of feeding on the scale needed. The bureaucracy could not grow rapidly enough and was constrained by prior ways of working which emphasised standardisation and control (Hamann 2020). The State also lacked information about who, beyond grant recipients, were in need, and it did not have the supply chains to get assistance to them quickly. At one point it was feared that three million people in the Western Cape alone would need emergency food aid (McGuire 2020).

CSOs were already operating on the ground. They were more flexible, held more local information and trust with communities than all spheres of government, and so were better placed in many respects to fill the gaps in this (or any) crisis.

The gaps were massive: First, because of the loss of income for three million people between February and April 2020 (Wills et al 2020). Second, government had been feeding more people before lockdown than during, due to the closure of Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDs) and the National School Nutrition Programme (Seekings 2020), although the Western Cape government resumed feeding schemes earlier than other parts of the country. Third, there were initial disruptions to the usual food distribution patterns, for example when informal food traders were prevented from operating as normal. Fourth, food prices increased significantly in the first two months of lockdown. Fifth,

emergency government grants and other payments took a while to come online. Sixth, the government's initial approach to food aid, in the form of food parcels, proved logistically intensive and arguably also costly.

CSOs, in their many guises, were able to mobilise quickly: Larger NGOs like the Mustadafin Foundation and Gift of the Givers stepped up their operations; others, such as Ladles of Love, expanded their activities beyond recognition; new self-organising networks, such as Community Action Networks (CANs), sprang up; existing community- and faith-based organisations similarly scaled up their feeding activities; street committees were reinvigorated; and countless 'aunties' and other individuals started ad hoc soup kitchens in their yards. There were also many examples of CSOs working with local and provincial governments as the immediacy of the moment broke down normal barriers and silos. In addition, the Western Cape Economic Development Partnership (EDP) convened a weekly **NGO-Government Food Relief Forum**.

This forum, and the networks that formed within and without it, helped overcome some of the many challenges that emergency feeding at this scale inevitably brought to the fore. These included competition for scarce resources, duplication and gaps in relief, as well as a lack of data about the extent of support provided and required in some communities (Cullinan and Ely 2020). There was also a significant mismatch between the pace at which CSOs and government could act: CSOs often needed information or resolution of an issue in a matter of hours, not days or weeks.

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1. Many ECDs are informal and not registered, and so the per-child subsidy from the government misses a very large percentage of these centres. CSOs have always been the main support of these but their operations were also curtailed at the start of the lockdown.





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## KEY CHALLENGES

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### **HARNESSING THE RELATIONSHIPS BEYOND THE CRISIS:**

The question now is how can this bottom-up mobilisation of CSOs be harnessed to help shape a more equitable food system in the long term?

The pandemic has exposed the inadequacy of existing governance processes and structures to realise the right to food, and the attainment of food and nutrition security. But the State cannot ensure food security on its own. We need a much broader whole-of-society response that addresses immediate issues, but also longer-term strategic processes which prioritise more integrated and local responses (Haysom 2020).

The people that are part of the local food system need to be able to play a more proactive role in decision-making about food (Southern African Food Lab 2020). This can be at a national, provincial and local level. It has been evident in the response to Covid-19 that the national government's view of the food system is only partial and does not easily embrace the informal food sector that services the majority of the population. CSOs can play a role in linking government to people on the ground as well as campaigning for change. They can also play a valuable role in research as co-researchers rather than just as research subjects.

Thick networks between civil society, academia and local government have already been building over the past 15 years (Haysom 2020). For example, processes associated with the Western Cape 'Nourish to Flourish Strategy'; the embedding of food concerns in the City of Cape Town Resilience Strategy; the establishment of the Western Cape Food Governance Community of Practice and the reinvigoration of the Food Dialogues; and more recently the Food Forum convened by EDP (arising from the Food Relief Forum), as well as the many place-based humanitarian partnerships and networks such as the CANs.

This may not yet reflect pluralistic governance, but it does indicate that momentum is building (and must be maintained as there is risk of significant attrition and burn-out). The time is right to support a whole-of-society approach to food governance that recognises the, at times, dissonant views and divergent needs of CSOs.

There is a need for multiple sources of impetus, not only from a few 'leaders' but by building coalitions that are flexible, dynamic and without unnecessary hierarchy. It's time to invest in building social infrastructure in society through an inclusive and dynamic approach that will help leverage more holistic and nuanced state responses.



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## RECOMMENDATIONS:

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### **RECOGNISE THE CRITICAL ROLE PLAYED BY CSOs (AND THE LIMITATIONS OF GOVERNMENT):**

Historically the important role that CSOs play in providing services to informal settlements has not been widely acknowledged by government, resulting in limited networks to activate during crises. A bottom-up, flexible approach is the only way to reach the food insecure at the community level.

### **INVEST IN STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS AND NETWORKS WITH (AND BETWEEN) CSOs:**

We need to build on emergent partnerships and networks within communities and CSOs and connect these with the relevant parts of government to improve coordination and coherence. But building relationships takes time and resources, and should be the focus of government efforts outside times of crisis in order to be able to operationalise these when needed.

Differing jurisdictional boundaries of various functions of government (e.g. health, ECDs) currently make this kind of whole-of-society approach challenging. Digital communications platforms such as the Food Forum and the Food Group of the C19 People's Coalition have proven to be successful models of improving visibility, communication and coordination between seemingly disparate groups as well as between government and CSOs. However, access to data and uneven network coverage hamper equitable participation in digital forums.

### **COLLECT AND SHARE DATA AND INFORMATION:**

Data mapping and information-sharing is needed so that both government and CSOs are aware of

what is being achieved on the ground and where the potentials and gaps lie. Provincial and local government are well placed to keep a central track of this data, which needs to be frequently updated. The value of local knowledge should also be recognised (local community mapping of needs and resources was instrumental in the early stages of the Covid crisis).

There must also be a good two-way flow of information between community initiatives and higher-level forums and networks so that both are aware of initiatives being mobilised as well as the needs and expectations on the ground.

### **SHIFT FROM 'PARTICIPATION' TO 'PARTNERING', WHICH MAY IMPLY RELINQUISHING SOME AUTHORITY:**

Government needs to create enabling conditions for supporting and empowering CSOs, rather than on controlling them through heavy handed regulations or excluding them from potential funding through arduous compliance procedures.

There needs to be a two-way relationship with joint decision-making, not merely check-box consultation and a culture of regulatory compliance that trumps service delivery.

### **SUPPORT A MORE SUSTAINABLE APPROACH TO FOOD (AID):**

Concerns from CSOs about donor fatigue on the one hand and issues of client dependency on the other mean that there is a growing need to find more sustainable and innovative models for supporting community feeding initiatives and solving the food problem more broadly going forward.

There is a tendency to emphasise urban agriculture as the default solution, for example by linking urban

agricultural programmes with community kitchens and ECD centres, or linking the expanded Public Works Programme to temporary employment for community gardeners or cooks for soup kitchens, etc. However, this may not always respond to the actual needs and capabilities of those in need of aid and also places the burden of change on the most disadvantaged.

Other more nuanced approaches to building local (food) economies should also be explored, such as support for informal food vendors, and sustained and systematic support for unregistered ECDs, where many young children get their only meals. Support for civil rights organisations to help mobilise communities around food would also be an important step towards moving beyond dependency on food aid.

This requires recognising the economic and governance complexities of the food system, rather than regarding food (aid) as the mandate of a few government departments such as social development and health.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND NON-STATE ACTORS NEED TO ENGAGE IN DIFFERENT WAYS OF WORKING IN INTERSECTORAL FORUMS IN ORDER TO BRING ABOUT STRUCTURAL CHANGE OF THE FOOD SYSTEM:

Ultimately a focus on food relief in exclusion of systemic change is inherently unsustainable. CSOs must look beyond a purely short-term intervention-by-intervention approach to addressing food issues and work together to seek longer-term solutions that address the underlying structural drivers of food insecurity.

This will mean linking with CSOs and other food practitioners campaigning around food and nutrition security and food justice to address the inherently political nature of food system change through advocacy and campaigning.

CSOs should also consider how their activities contribute to change through ‘scaling out’ (reaching more people), ‘scaling up’ (impacting policies and laws) and ‘scaling deep’ (impacting cultural and social roots of our behaviour).

## EXPERT VOICES

**T**his document is based on the discussions of the Food Governance Community of Practice, a social learning space initiated by the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security.

The community of practice is an open dialogue platform whose regular and active participants are considered members. Current membership includes academics, farmers, traders, state officials, civil society representatives and practitioners.

An online Community of Practice meeting was held on 23 June 2020 on ‘Civil Society Organisations and Emergency Food Aid: Learning lessons for an ongoing crisis.’ You can access the presentations

and panel responses from this meeting by clicking the following links: Keynote presentation: **Andrew Boraine** (Western Cape Economic Development Partnership) “Lessons from the Western Cape NGO-Government Food Relief Coordination Forum”. Panel responses: **Andy Du Plessis** (Food Forward); **Florian Kroll**, Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), UWC; **Elin Duby** (Muizenberg & Vrygrond CANs); **Mymoena Scholtz** (Where Rainbows Meet, Vrygrond); **Egbert Wessels** (PEDI); **Henriette Abrahams** (Bonteheuwel Development Forum); **Theresa Edlmann** (Black Sash).

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## AUTHORS

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### AUTHORS' DETAILS:

Dr Camilla Adelle, Department of Political Sciences,  
University of Pretoria.

Mr Florian Kroll, Institute for Poverty, Land and  
Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), University of the  
Western Cape.

Dr Jane Battersby, African Centre for Cities,  
University of Cape Town.

Dr Gareth Haysom, African Centre for Cities,  
University of Cape Town.

Dr Scott Drimie, Southern Africa Food Lab and  
Division of Human Nutrition, Faculty of Medicine  
and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University.

### CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Dr Camilla Adelle, [Camilla.adelle@up.ac.za](mailto:Camilla.adelle@up.ac.za)

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## ABOUT

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EMAIL: [foodsecurity@uwc.ac.za](mailto:foodsecurity@uwc.ac.za)

WEBSITE: [www.foodsecurity.ac.za](http://www.foodsecurity.ac.za)

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ASSISTANT EDITOR: Dr Elaine Sinden

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