

The six criteria for relaxing lockdowns

by

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Over the past three months, since South Africa joined the rest of the world in fighting the coronavirus pandemic, it has become clear that there has been different approaches adopted in different countries on how to respond to the Covid-19 outbreaks. Most countries adopted some form of lockdown or state of emergency to curb the spread of the virus. Under the guidance of the World Health Organization (WHO), it also became apparent that some global benchmarks have emerged to be used as a yardstick in assessing the progress of countries in terms of the effectiveness of its strategies for dealing with the crisis. One of the most important measures is mortality rates. According to the Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize, South Africa's mortality rate is 1,8% which is well below the global average of 6,6%. Furthermore, our recovery rate is 42,4%, above the global average of 38%.

The WHO provided the following recommendations for easing lockdown restrictions:

1. Strong surveillance, cases are declining and transmission is controlled;
2. Health systems capacity is in place to detect, isolate, test and treat every case and trace every contact;
3. The outbreak risks are minimised especially in settings like facilities and nursing homes;
4. The preventative measures are in place in workplaces, schools and other places that are essential for people to go to;
5. The importation of cases can be managed;
6. That communities are fully educated, engaged and empowered to adjust to the new norm.

Notwithstanding some pockets of excellence, it appears as if South Africa is currently only performing very well in criterion number 5, while lagging behind in the other five areas, despite good initiatives in meeting some of the other criteria. The drastic decision to relax the lockdown from level 4 to 3 in some districts therefore has been questioned and thus appears to be contrary to the WHO recommendations. Having said that, the reality is that the WHO criteria only cover the health imperatives, and not the socio-economic realities in these countries. For instance, it has become evident that the humanitarian crisis will be more devastating in African countries than in Western, European and Asian countries. The levels of poverty, inequality and unemployment are much higher in African countries than in Western and European countries.

Recently, the WHO praised South Africa's efforts in curbing the spread of the virus with one of the strictest lockdown regulations in the world. However, putting health first and the economy second has been the predominant philosophy of the South African government during the first 40 days of the lockdown. Poor decisions and irrational regulations such as the closing down of low-risk sectors such as e-commerce has unfortunately contributed to the destruction of the economy. Over the past ten days, and given pressure from business people, economists and other stakeholders, it has become evident from an economic perspective that the lockdown should be relaxed to return to some form of

economic activity, albeit with the required health risk restrictions in place. The closing down of businesses, and the impact thereof on poverty and hunger, coupled with the reality of mass job losses has become an unsustainable philosophy requiring a more multi-faceted approach. While this approach is commended as being more balanced in addressing both the health and economic risks, the sharp spike in infections is a major cause of concern. Government must be commended for its mass testing programme in major centres, although this should be expanded to cover the whole country, including provinces with low infection rates.

Admittedly, we must never lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with a global pandemic and there is no single party that has all the answers. Therefore, as we move to level 3 and maintain level 4 in high risk areas, we still require a careful, but systematic approach to dealing with the virus, as well as the unintended consequences of the socio-economic crisis caused by the lockdown. Multi-disciplinary expertise is needed to advise government on how to respond to the different aspects of the epidemic. The following actions are of critical importance in preparing South Africa in meeting the WHO criteria:

- Training of all employees returning to physical work sites;
- Communities must be fully empowered to adjust to the norm and to prevent the spread of the virus;
- Intensive Covid-19 prevention and hygiene programmes at work, including testing;
- More consistent and focused contact tracing interventions;
- Prevention programmes to prevent further outbreaks in work sites, hospitals, police stations, shops, old age homes and other high risk areas and sites;
- More decisive actions in strengthening the health system and protecting healthcare workers.

The Director General of the WHO, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus stated: “The risk of returning to lockdown remains very real if countries do not manage the transition extremely carefully and in a phased approach.” Given the significant increase in infections it appears as if South Africa may experience continuous challenges in implementing and maintaining appropriate level 4 interventions in hotspots, while adapting to level 3 regulations and interventions in other areas. Clearly, we need people-driven solutions, hence the need for involving people in preventative behaviour, the implementation of decisions and a more proactive approach to prevention at community and organisational level.

As a country with many active citizens involved in different socio-economic and health campaigns, we are faced with a unique opportunity of rising to the occasion and delivering our best in co-operating with the authorities and organisations in raising the bar with good implementation plans in curbing the further spread of the coronavirus. The next two weeks are very important in intensifying all efforts in preparing South Africans for meeting all six criteria of the WHO. Let us show them we can do it, not only to meet the criteria, but also to be focused and resolute in preventing and controlling the further spread of the Covid-19 virus.

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