

Government owes it to citizens to be transparent on lockdown

Uncertainty over plans to reopen economy adds to the anxiety of those whose livelihoods are threatened



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Critical Take

Transparency. This is a core principle of good governance and one that characterises open democratic societies.

We are living in extraordinary times where leaders have had to take unprecedented measures to preserve society. But this does not lessen the obligation to be transparent.

President Cyril Ramaphosa and his people need to organise a PowerPoint presentation explaining the phased easing of lockdown.

Just about a month ago, we received a presentation from Professor Salim Abdool Karim, adviser to Dr Zweli Mkhize, minister of health.

It was an excursion into the minister's chambers, where we, ordinary citizens, got to hear the kind of expert briefings that help Mkhize and his colleagues settle on measures to prevent the rapid spread of Covid-19 in SA.

The professor explained the nature of the Covid-19 epidemic in SA. In a succinct manner he provided reasons for SA's exceptional

experience with the disease. Whereas other jurisdictions had seen a dramatic rise in transmissions resulting in hospitals being overwhelmed, SA didn't. He showed how SA achieved a decline in the rate of new cases, plausibly due to interventions by the government, in particular the lockdown.

While conceding that SA cannot escape the worst of this epidemic, pointing to an inevitable peak in infections down the line, Karim argued

that the lifting of the lockdown would precipitate the coming peak. Mkhize and his colleagues in the coronavirus command council ostensibly acquiesced to this presentation being made public to justify the looming extension of the lockdown.

The lockdown has bought time. It has given the department of health time to assess capacity as well as prepare and strengthen its response.

But the lockdown has had unintended social and

economic consequences too, which cannot and will not be addressed by strides made in improving the health system.

We need answers on the impact on livelihoods. We need more than anecdotal evidence from the long queues for grants and food parcels. We need more than the observations from industry bodies about the impact on their members. We need more than just the concerns raised by trade unions.

The questions we need answered urgently are: What advice and data is the government's phased easing of the lockdown based on? What is its approach to

economic recovery and what thinking informs it?

There are debates raging right now about the reopening of the economy to save millions more jobs from being shed as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown. The anxiety in businesses and households alike is building up to a crescendo.

Although many South Africans have experience living from hand to mouth, surviving from day-to-day, it doesn't mean ordinary people don't see the necessity to and wisdom of planning for the future – near and far.

The policy decisions being made at national level, and the considerations underpinning them, have implications for our ability as citizens, parents, schools and businesses to plan and make decisions about our own actions.

The uncertainty is becoming unbearable for much of society who are not well enough informed about the government's position and decisions being made behind the scenes as well as about its capacity to address their concerns.

As citizens we need to be able to objectively weigh the government's actions against the criteria used for those actions, to decide whether we support those policies or not.

This is not about opposing the government. Informing and engaging the public will likely result in greater support, especially because it's a matter of life and death.

Transparency about SA's Covid-19 trajectory resulted in greater understanding and support for interventions.

A similar approach on the economy, a Karim-style presentation on the economic impact and a plan of action, is in order, Mr President.

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Epidemiologist Professor Salim Abdool Karim, who chairs the government's Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee, gave a succinct presentation of the nature of the virus. / SANDILE NDLOVU