

A young girl in a school uniform is walking on a sidewalk. The sidewalk has large, bold, black text painted on it that reads "HSRC RESEARCH DURING COVID-19". The girl is wearing a dark blue jacket and a patterned skirt. In the background, there are metal poles and a brick wall.

HSRC experts recommend improved psychosocial support in South Africa's schools.
Photo: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp

The importance of policy briefs in supporting engagements between researchers and policymakers

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a public health challenge – it is a broad, complex, and dynamic social and human challenge. The HSRC, as South Africa's public social science research institute, has undertaken a wide range of research projects exploring the social and human dynamics of the pandemic, both to increase our knowledge and to inform public policy. By *Konosoang Sobane, Michael Gastrow and Antoinette Oosthuizen*

The rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, has caught many countries unprepared. Early in 2020, it became apparent that the policy response to the pandemic should not only be informed by medical science, but also by the human and social sciences. Issues of perception, behaviour, communication, economic change, unemployment, human development, education, safety and security, and psychosocial challenges, among others, all require the insights of the human and social sciences for the formation of appropriate policy.

Following a year of multi-disciplinary research into the pandemic and its social dynamics, the HSRC is publishing a set of policy briefs capturing key insights and policy recommendations.

Schools: providing psychosocial support

Improving psychosocial support in SA schools during and after COVID-19 as part of a recovery plan evaluates the adequacy of existing psychosocial strategies of the Department of Basic Education's pandemic recovery plan. The HSRC's Fabian Arends and colleagues synthesised research on psychosocial support in schools and identified a policy gap in psychosocial and well-being programming in school settings. Current health-related policies focus mostly on treatment and prevention and less on psychosocial health and well-being. The brief recommends a review of existing national policies to include psychosocial health and well-being support for learners, teachers, and non-teaching staff who have been

directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19. The brief also recommends decentralised psychosocial support programmes that include district officials. Psychosocial support specialists can assist principals and administrators and train teachers to deal with learning recovery and learners' mental-health and psychosocial needs.

Funerals: the sociocultural challenge

Death, dignity and distress in the rural Eastern Cape under COVID-19, compiled by the HSRC's Prof Leslie Bank and colleagues, explores how the coronavirus outbreak and the responses by the South African government affected local funeral and burial practices of rural communities in the Eastern Cape. Their research

established that the implementation of the new rules and regulations pertaining to funerals and the handling of COVID-19 corpses was causing great cultural harm. This led to widespread strategic resistance to these rules among local communities.

The brief recommends that the government facilitates greater involvement of local communities in deciding how best to combat the virus. Broader public education efforts should be led by senior government officials. Well-resourced train-the-trainer programmes should inform people in their own language, in their own places, and through channels that they understand and respect.

Funeral practices need to conform to COVID-19 regulations, but in a way that does not infringe on sociocultural practices. For example, family members should be permitted to view and communicate with the body at the mortuary and again at home.

Consideration should be given to interring bodies in shrouds in a way that leaves the face visible.

Food security

COVID-19 pandemic and the food security and nutrition nexus: Implications for vulnerable urban households in South Africa finds that the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown have been exacerbated by rising poverty and unemployment, especially in urban households. The HSRC's Blessing Masamba and colleagues warn that reduced access to food, combined with isolation, results in limited intake of vitamins, minerals, protein, fatty acids and other food supplements. This poses a risk to vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly and those with chronic diseases. The researchers recommend the scaling up of social protection programmes in urban households. They propose that the government develops a National Pandemic

Contingency Plan that incorporates food, water and medication to deal with future pandemics and extreme climate events, such as droughts and flooding.

Human rights and inclusivity

COVID-19 and human rights limitations: Taking public opinion into account, authored by the HSRC's Prof Narnia Bohler-Muller and colleagues, suggests that participatory, inclusive and adaptive processes will be essential to maintain support of, and adherence to, regulations. The stringent lockdown in South Africa severely limited people's human rights, including their freedom of movement, association, assembly, trade and education. Maintaining trust and compliance will require openness, transparency and inclusive forms of decision making; effective communication about why certain regulations are necessary and rational; and spaces for individuals,



Residents of Tafelsig in Mitchells Plain protest for food parcels during the COVID-19 lockdown in April 2020.

Photo: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp

communities and stakeholders to provide feedback and share views.

Regulations should also be of limited duration, evidence based, and reviewable. The researchers warn that blanket bans – such as that imposed on tobacco products – are arguably ineffective and deeply polarising, to the extent that it reduces confidence in the government's handling of the pandemic and pro-sacrifice orientations. Since public health emergencies place immense power in the hands of executive leadership, we also need continued independent oversight of government actions affecting rights of rights of society, communities and individuals.

Policy briefs as a pathway to research impact

Government policies need to be evidence based, not only to justify allocating scarce resources to policy interventions, but also to retain public trust and acceptance. During the

COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers have had to contend with pandemic-related time constraints and large volumes of research from various sources, some of which did not apply to all country settings.

In these policy briefs, substantial bodies of HSRC research have been synthesised and summarised to be widely disseminated to policymakers and the broader public, providing an important pathway to achieving greater research impact.

The key value of these policy briefs lies in their concise format. Dense research reports are repackaged in an easily accessible language and style to highlight key research activities, findings and recommendations, which can be incorporated into policymaking processes.

The examples in this article highlight ways to improve psychosocial support in schools; how to reduce cultural harm due to COVID-19 regulations

during funeral rituals; how to protect vulnerable households during disasters; and they suggest more inclusive consultation on COVID-19 regulations and improved oversight of government actions that may limit human rights.

The recommendations in the policy briefs support a collective understanding of the social dynamics of the pandemic in South Africa, complementing biomedical and other research. Including such human and social science perspectives in policy development will help inform proactive and well-targeted responses during times of crisis and improve public acceptance of policy implementation.

Link to the HSRC's latest policy briefs

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