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A qualitative analysis of comments received from the general public in response to gazetted amendments to the Disaster Management Act Regulations: Alert Level 3 (Gazette 43521 of 12 July 2020)



INTRODUCTION

- The HSRC was requested to receive email responses from the general public to the gazetted amendments to the Disaster Management Act Regulations: Alert level 3 (Gazette 43521 of 12 July 2020) during Coronavirus COVID-19 as announced by the President on Sunday, 12 July 2020.
- The comments@hsrc.ac.za email address received 636 emails by the 24th of July 2020.
- The emails received are **not representative of the general population**, and are qualitative in nature and were voluntarily sent mostly by individuals as opposed to organisations and groups.
- The researchers signed a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) to ensure confidentiality. Ethical approval was not sought from the HSRC ethics committee, as this was not a commissioned, formal research project.
- The views expressed in this presentation **are not the views** of the HSRC and are an analysis of sentiments received on behalf of Government

METHODOLOGY

- The HSRC team developed a framework for capturing individual emails.
- These were sorted by sector and collated into themes.
- Each email was captured in the framework spreadsheet and then analysed.
- Qualitative analyses were undertaken to identify themes and sentiments emerging from the data.
- Summaries were written for every 100 comments.
- These summaries were collated into a single document.

SUMMARY OF THEMES EMERGENT IN THE DATA

- As South Africa and the rest of the world are battling with the coronavirus pandemic, the implemented regulations to curb the spread of Covid-19 have elicited different reactions from the people of South Africa.
- While the regulations are meant to achieve balance between saving lives and saving the economy, the general tenor of the responses is one of frustration from citizens regarding the official approach of government to the pandemic.
- The bulk of the responses were to the lockdown regulations.
- While there was some support for government's strategy, most responses expressed dissatisfaction with what were perceived to be contradictions in the regulations.
- There are specific areas that evoke frustration and much attention, namely:
 - Alcohol & tobacco ban
 - The incapacitated health system,
 - Travel and public transport,
 - Mask wearing,
 - COVID-19 relief funds,
 - Coping mechanisms,
 - Racism/Hate mail, and
 - Schools opening

OVERVIEW

- The responses are polarized and are on a continuum
- The bulk of the emails carried negative views, even those imploring government to assist. Others outrightly condemned government for mismanagement of public funds and corruption and not having people's best interests at heart.
- Those who are in favour of government regulations in managing the COVID-19 pandemic hold the view that escalating infections call for government either maintaining the current measures or even revert to a hard lockdown - Level 5.
- Loss of livelihoods underpinned much of the opposition. Evident in the emails was a cross cutting concern with the impact of the lockdown on the economy.
- There was a significant constant in the responses, that there should be much clearer and stricter oversight of the basic safety regulations
- There was emphasis on the need for government to regulate both private and state firms to strictly adhere to regulations.
- There was also concern about the inconsistent and variable application of the regulations
- There were requests that the simple application of law and order, such as punishing drunken-driving and gender-based violence more assiduously, would go a long way in steering the public towards more socially appropriate forms of behaviour.
- There was general dissatisfaction with the fact that the prohibitions treated everyone the same. Some responses said that law-abiding citizens should not be "punished" for the bad and irresponsible behaviour of some.
- There were critiques of government taking away people's basic freedoms and beginning to take authoritarian and even despotic actions against the South African public
- The majority of the comments were about the alcohol and tobacco ban.



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THEME 1: SUPPORT AND FRUSTRATIONS WITH ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO

- The alcohol and tobacco ban stimulated severe criticism which takes the view that the arguments and motivation behind the bans is not **supported by science**, and that it causes more harm than good.
- The primary concern highlighted by the comments is the negative impact the ban will have on the **economy and livelihoods** of the people represented by the entire value chain of the alcohol industry, from farmers, to brewers, distillers, retailers, restaurants, taverns and liquor traders. The view was expressed that the revenue loss would be huge and hard to bear for the country and that this would affect other streams of income such as media and advertising, transportation and manufacturing.
- Mention was made about the already prevalent surge of the **illicit trade** of tobacco with smokers opting to acquire cigarettes illegally which come at very high cost and are readily available and that the net effect does not equate to a reduction in the number of smokers. There is also reference made to the harmful effects of illegal cigarettes on the health of those desperate for it. This regulation is said to encourage illegal activity and results in a **loss of tax**.

- There were a few **expressions of support** for the continued ban on sale of tobacco products.

I fully support the ban on alcohol and tobacco, and I am glad that the government is standing by its decision. I know the tobacco matter still heading to court, but until then keep enforcing it. (Male, member of the public).

Please zoom in on foreign owned spaza shops because they are selling tobacco freely, even to children. (Female, member of the public)

The ban on alcohol is commendable. (Male, member of the public)

- Some responses described the bans as an **infringement on their right** to choose whether to smoke or not, and one member mentioned smoking as a coping mechanism for dealing with stress and mental illness.

Please let us have cigarettes. My friend is mentally ill and she smokes and she is harming herself due to stress and needing to visualize pain. It's heart breaking. The country needs the tax money badly. Don't rob everyone over hospitals. (Female, member of the public)

- There were comments that noted that the effects of **tobacco were less harmful** than the impact of alcohol, so they welcomed the ban of alcohol sales. There was a view that there were many more harmful practices than smoking and drinking.
- It was noted that the **actions of the minority** have led to the **majority** having to do without alcohol and to a lesser extent cigarettes or tobacco products.



THEME 2: HEALTHCARE SYSTEM FAILURE

- There is a general emphasis that the health sector is in a poor, dysfunctional condition and this has been largely caused by the failure of the state.
- Impacts of alcohol and tobacco can therefore not be blamed for this state of affairs
- The maladministration and corruption-plagued governance is both a historic and political problem.
- The emergence of the pandemic is exposing such incompetence and there is fear of a near collapse of the health system in South Africa.

THEME 3: TRAVEL AND TAXI'S

- While there was an **acknowledgement and a liking** of government actions broadly, there was a view that the state **lacked a willingness** to tackle some **hard questions**. Most notable in this space were the taxi industry and the teachers' unions. The public transport concern, mainly about the taxi industry and its **inability** to guarantee people's safety, has been one of the areas regarding compliance with the regulations.
- The taxi industry has been **at odds with the government** for a while and the emergence of COVID-19 made things **worse**. The taxi owners **rejected the social relief fund** put forward by the government for the industry and embarked on a strike and threatened to bring the country to a standstill. They also threatened to load 100% capacity.
- The announcement by government that taxis could load to full capacity for local travel and 70% for long distance was **hugely criticized** as it is perceived as government granting **special treatment** to the industry. There was also a view that government actions were incoherent i.e. fully loading taxis but family cars not being able to carry maximum passengers was referred to as being 'ridiculous.'
- There was a general feeling that the taxi industry was being **treated preferentially** over other industries. Commenters were generally unhappy about the 100% taxi capacity and felt that public transport users were put **at risk of infection**.
- Such inconsistencies were attributed to '**weak leadership**' with reference to the President. There was particularly strong sentiment suggesting that the **government feared the taxi industry** which unilaterally adjusted the number of passengers boarding each taxi in many urban areas and the government merely rubber-stamping this action. This led to a call for government to ensure that there was a broad and countrywide strict **enforcement of regulations** i.e. the wearing of masks and social distancing without exceptions.
- Concerns were raised about learners infecting teachers and domestic workers on their way to work. Comments and queries were further layered with far reaching impacts of overloaded taxis. A taxi commuter expressed the view that she **feared for her life** because of overloaded taxis. The **practical improbability** of passengers keeping windows open for ventilation and that no hand sanitizers were provided upon boarding was also raised. Many commented that it was **not mandatory** to wear a mask in boarding a taxi. Concern was raised for the driver of the taxi who would be **most at risk** even for multiple short distance trips.
- Concerns around inter-provincial travel included the **impact on families** where spouses lived and worked in different provinces, and consequently could not be together or travel to see each other during the lockdown period. In relation to business travel, one member of the public urged government to **think more creatively** around **opening up air travel for business**, which was an important step in allowing more **economic activity**, similarly a member who worked on board ships requested that they be allowed to leave the country and start working again.

It makes no sense that the president would allow taxis to operate at full capacity while they have increased prices. What happened to social distancing? (Male, member of the public)

I'm a married father of four kids. I stay in Mpumalanga where I work and my home is in Limpopo where my family is permanently based. Since the start of a lockdown on the 26th March I visited my family only twice because I couldn't find a relevant permit to visit the family. (Male, member of the public)

We need to be creative as we try and balance the scales between the spreading of COVID-19, and getting the economy running as soon as possible with the least risk. We can open up business travel for domestic and international transit. I propose we use rapid test kits that detect the virus in 10 - 15minutes. The price of which can be included in the price of the ticket. (Male, member of the public)



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THEME 4: SCHOOLS

- While there was anxiety amongst some of the respondents about the loss of learning time and the danger that the academic year would need to be abandoned, most responses sought schools to be shut down until the infection peak had been reached.



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THEME 5: RELIEF FUNDS

- Emails expressed **difficulties in accessing** the government relief funds
- Applied for the relief fund many times with **no response** from the department
- The **plight of people** going hungry, losing or at risk of losing their jobs and their homes due to less work during lockdown were expressed.
- Concerns about UIF application **backlogs**, options for individuals who did not qualify for SASSA COVID relief funds or UIF, ways of accessing Retirement Annuities early.
- One member raised concern that people could commit suicide because they **experience stress** regarding job losses or the threat of job losses.

THEME 6: RACISM AND HATE MAIL

- **Implicit and explicit** expressions of racism were evident in some of the emails.
- Many used the opportunity to make comments about black peoples' incompetence. The insinuation that corruption was a black attribute was evident in a few emails.
- Micro aggressions and averse racism was expressed in a number of emails:
 - “all lives matter “, “we know who the culprits are...put townships under level 5”, “playing the race card”*
- A few emails suggested that lockdown was a communist plot.



THEME 7: FAKE NEWS/ SOCIAL MEDIA

- A small number of emails questioned the legitimacy and **validity of the science** behind government's strategy.
- Query related to the legitimacy of information on masks on social media and which **sources to trust**.
- One email requested that a social media post be reviewed that "confirms" the virus is a scam. This indicates that **more warnings** about the fake news in circulation should be issued.



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THEME 8: MASK WEARING

- One individual appealed to the government **to provide masks in the same way condoms were provided.**
- **Physical difficulties** with mask wearing due to underlying conditions i.e. asthma
- One individual expressed fear of arrest for not wearing a mask upon his return to work.
- Issues concerning wearing of masks were related to **use within taxis** and concerns over homeless people not having masks or wearing dirty masks.
- Concern about the public wearing **medical masks**: raised by a health care worker, who mentioned that the public discarded used masks as these were supposed to be discarded as health care risk waste. Secondly, the concern that supply might dwindle as health care workers have to share supply with the public. A request for government to regulate wearing medical masks only within health care facilities.
“There might be a time where health workers will not be able to get these masks as we share them with public”. The public should instead wear cloth masks.
- **Praises of the President** for emphasising wearing of cloth masks and importantly that it should cover both nose and mouth.
- The wearing of Perspex masks was criticized for being useless.
- One individual suggested that bus and taxi operators, and spaza shop owners **should be fined** for allowing people inside their vehicles or their shops without masks. The responsible individual should also be fined.



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THEME 9: COPING MECHANISMS

- Commenters **expressed dissatisfaction** about the ban on family visits. Some of them indicated that the ban was **unjustifiable** because the public was already exercising social distancing and there was no reason where they could not have social family visits. Some saw this ban as having the potential to **break up families**.
- The ban on family visits was mockingly compared to the taxi situation and the easing of restrictions, which allowed casinos, restaurants and other social spaces to be re-opened. Families being able to gather in public establishments but not at home was questioned.
- Members of the public mentioned that there is a need for families to see each other for **support and renewed hope**, rather than be continually isolated from such support. People would rather work and **face the risk of infection** than to not work and see family members go to bed hungry.
- An appeal for easing of restrictions on camping and access to beaches was described as a way of **cop**ing.
- The responses collectively point to the **psychological impacts** of being restricted and how the inconsistency may cause people to rebel. This was coupled with the reliance of some on alcohol and tobacco products to **cope with the general stresses of life**.
- A query regarding permission for the cultural practice of animal slaughtering and whether an explicit restriction exists in that regard was raised.

OVERALL SENTIMENTS - NEGATIVE

Negative sentiments include that South Africans have started to **lose trust in the government** to effectively manage the pandemic. Sentiments include feeling **disappointed, sad, angry, overlooked or unimportant**. Also a sentiment that some regulations do not make logical sense, regulations are not **consistently applied**, while some feel that government want to **control** them.

The following quotation captures much of the sentiments raised by members of the public:

“South Africans no longer trust the government. I know this is new territory but all this constant rules and flip-flopping on rules makes you look incompetent.

Right now South Africans are more scared of being murdered, raped and losing their job than the virus and the long-term effects this lockdown will bring... We are all scared but the people are becoming more scared of the government and the collapse of everything they know, than the virus... Focus on areas with high infections rather than national rules. These were all things you said you would do but still haven't. (Female, member of the public)”

In addition, one member offered the sentiment that **economic considerations** appear to be the primary concern and health considerations:

“The President stated that there is evidence that the Virus is air borne however we continue to allow people to eat in restaurants without their masks. This would lead any reasonable person to believe that the risk of transmission is tolerable if there's an economic benefit of sorts. In addition to this, the fact taxis were able to strong arm the NCCC into folding to their (unsafe) demands shows an instance when the economics were prioritized over health guidelines of social distancing. (Female, member of the public)”

OVERALL SENTIMENTS - POSITIVE

Positive sentiments are centred around **support for the re-banning of alcohol sales** and in so doing **protecting health care personnel** and importantly, **preserving hospital beds** for COVID-19 patients:

“Very well done for re-introducing the alcohol ban and the curfew. If people could see what our Doctor daughter is seeing every day with the admissions at a Johannesburg state hospital, they would agree that the alcohol ban should never have been lifted in the first place. We are drinkers ourselves but fully support the need for these new regulations and it is the duty of all South Africans to accept this small sacrifice for the greater good of protecting beds, protecting healthcare workers and ultimately protecting lives.” (Male, member of the public)

“I fully support the Regulations. And it will be appropriate if the public can have where we can be whistle blowers to report those who sell alcohol illegally during this period.” (Female, member of the public)



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RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SOME OF THE 636 COMMENTS RECEIVED

- Supply sanitizers to taxi operators and visit taxi ranks to check whether measures are being adhered to:
 - Fine people for not wearing masks in public transport;
 - Roadblocks to check for adherence and general overall enforcement of the regulations.
- The use of full plastic visors in situations where social distancing is not possible;
- Lifting the ban on cigarettes temporarily until any negative consequences become apparent
Increasing the tax on cigarette and alcohol sales. Use tax revenue to fund more field hospitals and medical care
 - Implementing a curfew and stricter sale times for the sale of alcohol;
 - Limiting the amount of alcohol purchased on a weekly basis, per household;
 - Online sale of alcohol and cigarettes;
- Appointing properly qualified people to deal with gender-based crimes;
- Stricter controls at the borders of provinces and improving processes for application for interprovincial travel;

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SOME OF THE 636 COMMENTS

- Keeping schools closed during winter months and peak COVID-19 season
 - Each secondary school grade to have a separate day to go to school
 - Develop online teaching methods for schools;
- Consider a Monday-Thursday working week and hard lock down from Friday to Sunday where you can only leave home for essential items.
 - Work hours during the cold season to begins at 9 or 10am.
- Hold those accountable for not adhering to lockdown regulations;
 - Keeping the economy going including the bottle stores and punish only those that do not adhere to the rules and regulations of the lockdown;
- People be allowed to engage in cleansing rituals for one month after a death; removing the regulations prohibiting cleansing rituals;
- Pregnant women need to be included in measures to protect employees with compromised immune systems.

THANK YOU

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