

Nurturing Rural Resilience: Coping Strategies and Collaborative Initiatives in South Africa's COVID-19 Response

Overview

The susceptibility of rural areas to the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic is readily apparent, particularly given the pre-existing conditions of poverty and resource limitations within these communities. Consequently, rural populations confront considerable adversity amid the pandemic. The capacity of these communities to withstand such challenges hinges upon their adeptness in managing the resultant impacts. This policy brief emanates from a research inquiry conducted within two distinct local municipalities in South Africa, namely Matatiele and Winnie Madikizela Mandela (WMM). It delineates the coping mechanisms employed by these municipalities to contend with the exigencies imposed by the COVID-19 crisis. Notably, strategies encompassing the mitigation of food insecurity, the diversification of income streams, the enhancement of emotional well-being, and the curtailment of expenditures assume primacy among individuals endeavouring to secure alternative means of sustenance. This observation underscores the fundamental role of coping strategies, often centred around the satisfaction of elemental requisites such as income generation and food provision. To fortify these communities against potential disruptions, cultivating resilient local institutions and implementing efficacious collaborative endeavours emerge as indispensable. Such measures empower communities to identify and adopt alternative livelihoods, concurrently facilitating the establishment of a supportive infrastructural framework.

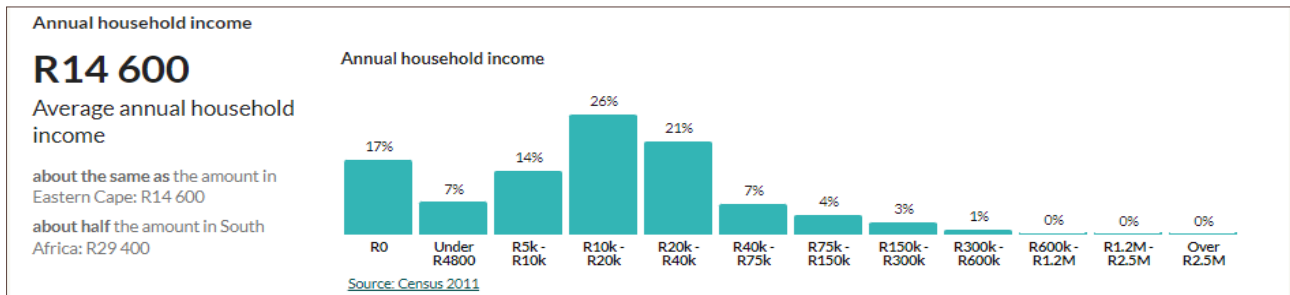
What is the Issue?

Studies on crises have consistently demonstrated that during the peaks of global emergencies like COVID-19, individuals in rural areas, particularly those from low-income households, suffer more harshly than their urban counterparts (Iwara et al., 2020). This disparity is primarily because most rural residents depend on essential resources sourced from urban areas for sustenance. Moreover, their livelihoods often hinge on daily subsistence activities. The suspension of such economic and social activities disrupts the urban-rural supply chain, creating economic

challenges that permeate deep within the rural communities.

This policy brief draws on the study conducted in Winnie Madikizela Mandela (WMM) and Matatiele Local Municipalities within the Alfred Nzo district municipality in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Both municipalities struggle with crippling poverty and unemployment. Education levels are notably low, with only 5% holding higher education qualifications (Cronje, 2014). The high poverty rates are exacerbated by a reliance on child support grants and old age pensions,

hindering self-sufficiency for many families. Despite being rich in agriculture, mining, and tourism potential, these sectors are underdeveloped and employ few people. Moreover, both Municipalities face challenges such as prolonged droughts, winter conditions, and the adverse effects of climate change.



Graph depicting the annual household income in Alfred Nzo District Municipality.

Source WaziMap <https://wazimap.co.za/profiles/district-DC44-alfred-nzo/>

Poor delivery of basic service and limited municipal resources further hampers the livelihood capabilities of the communities. The socio-economic situation in these municipalities has historical roots in colonialism, apartheid, and the homeland system. WMM and Matatiele local municipalities, situated in the former Transkei Homeland, were deprived of investment and development under apartheid. Labour migration to urban centres, initiated during apartheid, remains a norm, with a significant portion of migrants from the Eastern Cape. The existing coping mechanisms in rural communities are strained by the pandemic, interacting with pre-existing vulnerabilities and potentially leading to more adverse outcomes. The study examined how residents in the municipalities navigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic amidst the backdrop of longstanding challenges.

Research Overview

The research team drew on a mixed-method approach to understand the strategies the selected rural communities adopted in addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study used statistical and narrative data from all rural residents categorised based on socio-economic (income and employment status) and socio-cultural (gender and institutional/cultural affiliation) divisions in the selected municipalities. Information was gathered using interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires.

Research Findings

The global impact of COVID-19 prompted governments and rural communities to implement diverse coping strategies amid pre-existing challenges. Primary coping strategies in WMM and Matatiele local municipalities include gardening, home-based food production, and relying on physical and natural resources. Subsistence farming was prevalent among nearly all households, with some contributing aid to impoverished community members. The pandemic emphasised the need for increased home-based food production due to limitations on accessing town markets. Gardening as a coping strategy received support from local civil society organisations. For instance, government departments and interest groups aided communities and addressed food insecurity by distributing seedlings, providing food parcels, offering health and hygiene training, and conducting emotional well-being programs. However, their response capacity was constrained by factors like limited resources and infrastructure deficits. Many community members had limited savings; therefore, their coping strategies involved decreased expenditure, reduced remittances, borrowing, begging, and seeking secondary employment. Reduced working hours, income cuts and loss of employment during the lockdown affected households, leading to financial strains and job hunting. Loss of livelihood opportunities and slowed economic activities push communities further into poverty.

Policy Directions

- ♣ **Strengthening Local Institutions:** Local institutions could be strengthened by building their capacity to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed for disaster preparedness, response and recovery. Also, more financial and human resources are needed to empower local municipalities, traditional leaders and civil society organisation. Coordinated responses could be effectively developed and implemented with active collaboration and knowledge sharing between government agencies, local institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).
- ♣ **Infrastructure Development:** The critical role of local government investment in infrastructure development, such as roads, water systems and communication networks, is underscored. Sustainable funding models that allow rural communities to build financial reserves for infrastructure construction and maintenance would significantly promote their resilience against future pandemics and disasters. Local communities should be empowered to participate in planning and decision-making processes related

to infrastructure development, ensuring their needs and priorities are addressed.

- ♣ **Livelihood Diversification and Social Safety Nets:** Alternative livelihoods of rural communities should be encouraged and supported through programs that support agricultural activities, small-scale businesses, and other sustainable income-generating initiatives. Access to social safety nets like old age pensions and child support grants should be expanded and improved to provide vulnerable populations with a safety cushion during shocks. Implementing financial literacy initiatives would be helpful in equipping individuals with the knowledge and abilities to manage their finances, thereby reducing their susceptibility to debt and exploitation. Ultimately, it is crucial to identify the unique needs and vulnerabilities of rural communities during pandemics should be determined, recognising the distinctive characteristics of each context. This ensures that the formulation and execution of policies and programs lead to intended results. It is critical to highlight the importance of government empowerment to enable communities to be self-sufficient without excessive reliance on governmental assistance.

References

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Cite this policy brief

Okem, A. E., Mubangizi, B., Adekanla, N., & John, S. F. (2023). Nurturing Rural Resilience: Coping Strategies and Collaborative Initiatives in South Africa's COVID-19 Response. Policy Brief No.6. Durban: Research Chair in Sustainable Rural Livelihoods, University of KwaZulu-Natal.