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RESEARCH REPORT



Understanding the Interplay Among Vulnerabilities, Livelihoods, and Institutional Dynamics in the Context of COVID-19: A Case Study of Selected Rural Communities in South Africa

NRF/SARChI Chair in Sustainable
Rural Livelihoods

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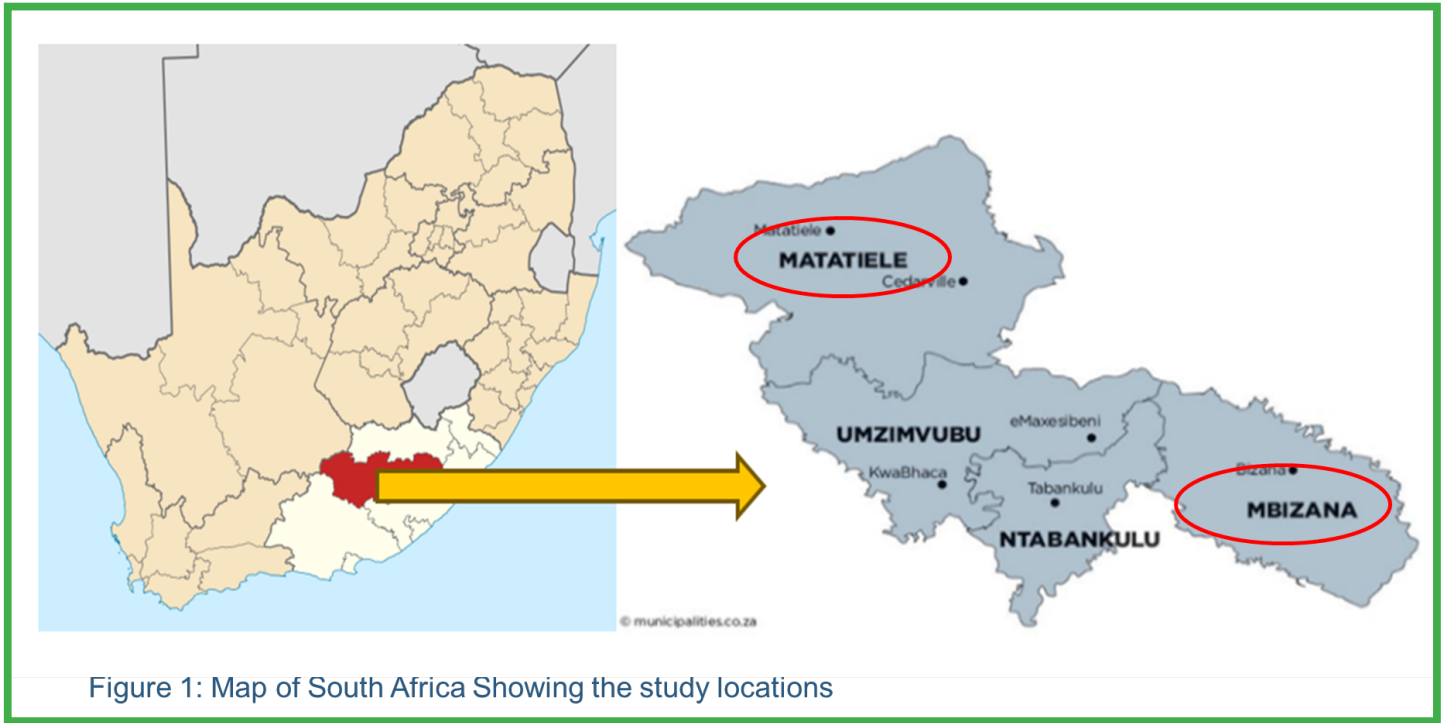


Figure 1: Map of South Africa Showing the study locations



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List of Abbreviations

CBO:	Community Based Organisation
COGTA:	Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs
COVID-19:	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
DFFE:	Department of Forestry Fisheries and Environment
DMN:	Disaster Management Unit
FGD:	Focus Groups Discussions
FGDs:	Focus Group Discussions
IDs:	Identifications
JOC:	Joint Operations Committee
LIMA:	Rural Development Foundation
MLM:	Matatiele Local Municipality
NCCC:	National Coronavirus Command Council
NGOs:	Non Governmental Organisations
NRF:	National Research Foundation
PPEs:	Personal Protective Equipment
R:	The South African Rand
SA:	South Africa
SAPS:	South African Police Services
TV:	Television
UKZN:	The University of Kwazulu-Natal
WMMLM:	Winnie Madikizela-Mandela Local Municipality





Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis that predominantly made headlines with images of deserted urban landscapes and overwhelmed metropolitan hospitals, has often overshadowed the nuanced and equally significant ramifications it holds for rural regions. While cities found themselves at the forefront of academic and policy discussions, rural communities, with their unique vulnerabilities and challenges, contended with the pandemic's blows in relative obscurity. This research seeks to illuminate these less explored terrains, mainly focusing on the Eastern Cape Province's rural municipalities of Matatiele and Winnie Madikizela Mandela. These areas, steeped in a rich but challenging history, faced the COVID-19 pandemic not as an isolated event but as an exacerbation of pre-existing vulnerabilities.

As resilience morphs from a scholarly construct to an everyday survival reality for these communities, our study employs the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and Resilience Theory to navigate the complex terrains of this crisis. In understanding their responses, coping mechanisms, and emergent needs, we've undertaken an exhaustive multidisciplinary exploration, culminating in a series of academic articles and a comprehensive technical report.

About the report

While our academic outputs cater for scholarly audiences, offering intricate analyses and methodological deliberations, this technical report considers a different path. Recognising the vast spectrum of stakeholders; from policy makers to practitioners - whose decisions and actions are pivotal in shaping the future of rural communities, we've crafted this report to be accessible, clear, and action-oriented.

- ♣ **Simplicity:** Away from the academic jargon and complex terminologies, this report communicates in a plain language, ensuring that findings are clear despite the academic level.



- ♣ **Visuals:** To further enhance the report's accessibility, we've incorporated a range of visuals – charts, graphs, and illustrative diagrams – to aid the understanding, and also offer a quick snapshot of key findings and recommendations.
- ♣ **Utility:** At its core, the report aims to be a tool for decision-makers, offering them grounded insights and actionable recommendations. By shedding light on the interplay of vulnerabilities, livelihoods, and institutional dynamics in the context of COVID-19 in rural settings, we hope to inform strategies that can more effectively address similar challenges in future.

In addition, the qualitative data from this study was analysed using content analysis. The content analysis was carried out thematically by coding the bunch of text obtained from the field and creating themes as coding, thematic classification of coded texts, and integrating, refining and writing-up theoretical outcomes. NVIVO version 12 was used to code and develop themes from the data with thorough probing into the socio-economic implication of the pandemic on our unit of analysis.

Specifically, well-defined explanatory mix, spread across various pre-existing resource endowment of individuals in the sustainable livelihood framework were used to analyse the socio-economic vulnerability of people using consumption and income effect of the pandemic.

In conclusion, this technical report stands as a bridge between rigorous research and actionable insights. In synthesising our findings in a user-friendly format, we aspire to arm policymakers and practitioners with the knowledge and understanding required to devise robust, informed strategies. Strategies that can pave the way for more resilient rural communities, better equipped to face the multifaceted challenges of disasters and pandemics. The report is divided into two sections, presenting qualitative and quantitative data.

Section One

Qualitative Data Findings

Offering a more intimate glimpse into the lived experiences of community members, this section leans on qualitative insights. It surfaces personal narratives, shared community sentiments, and lived realities during the pandemic. Themes such as changes in cultural practices, educational disruptions, and shifts in local dynamics, and providing a human touch to the data-driven insights.

Pre-existing vulnerability conditions

Methodology

Using both Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and interviews, respondents highlighted several conditions, situations and experiences that made them vulnerable before the COVID-19 pandemic, making them more sensitive to the impacts of the pandemic. These conditions range from natural events and climatic events to issues relating to poor infrastructure and socio-economic vulnerabilities, highlighted in the following sub-themes:

Extreme climate events

Extreme weather conditions were a major pre-existing vulnerability identified by most participants in both Bizana and Matatiele. This involved fluctuating weather conditions between extremes within short periods. As an FGD participant from the Disaster Management Unit (DMU) of WMMLM observed,

“One day it's heavy rainfall, one day it's lightning; another day it's strong winds and that other day it's something else

Some of these extreme weather events coincided with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly, heavy rainfall. These communities, while being in a region affected by extended droughts, were witnessing heavy rainfall, causing severe damages; and COVID-19 regulations made it difficult for affected community members to draw on their social capital for support. Another FGD participant expressed this:

...for instance, in December 2020, the same year that the pandemic had been declared in March the hard lockdown, the adjustment of the regulations in December there were heavy rainfall. Almost 120 households were affected due to heavy rainfall. Now the people that would have been able to deal with the fact that the roof of my house has been damaged can't because they are no longer employed.... You can't go to the neighbour because we're saying social distancing, you can't go to the neighbour because it's highly probable that the neighbour is affected by the same disaster (Disaster Management Unit, WMMLM),

This was a particularly helpless situation for the communities because the extreme weather events coincided with the emergence of COVID-19 and the several challenges that followed, such as unemployment and restriction of movements and interactions. For most participants, the heavy rains appear to have been the most negatively impactful event in the period leading to the COVID-19 pandemic. The rains had destroyed homes, gardens, crops, and livestock, making agricultural activities difficult or impossible. Most interview participants echoed the words of participant 13, who noted that,

“The high levels of rainfall destroyed many crops and hindered farming activities. Crops failed due to floods and cattle drowned in wetlands.”

The floods caused by the heavy rains were also reported to have brought diseases that affected both crops and livestock. Thus, farming activities generally dropped due to extreme rain, severely undermining livelihoods – a situation that was then worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and regulations. According to Participant 1,

those that have livestock are complaining about deceases that are brought by too much rain”, and Participant 7 noted that farmers were unable to purchase livestock medicine to deal with these diseases.

It is not clear from the participants why exactly farmers could not purchase livestock medicine, but given the context of the conversation, it is very likely due to lack of money, loss of business and restrictions at the onset of the pandemic.

High unemployment

Unemployment was a prevailing pre-existing vulnerability condition in the data collected. The majority of the rural population is unemployed and depends on a social grant. This was specifically pointed out during the FGD with SaveAct, an organisation that seeks to end poverty and empower rural communities financially through saving groups. They noted that

“We are dealing with rural villages and 90% of the people are unemployed and depend on social grants (FGD SaveAct Matatiele).”

Many participants confirmed the high-level of unemployment by sharing their personal experiences with employment and earning a living individually or as a household. This is demonstrated in the following excerpts from participants:

I was working in Free State as a constructor. I was not the primary provider but my sister was until she passed away. Now the primary provider is my grandmother. I am not employed. We receive grants as a source of income (Participant 13).

and,

I was selling metal scrap, I was recycling and was able to make money, and no one is permanently employed in my family. We depend on recycling and others are in Cape Town (Participant 14).

The references to Free State and Cape Town highlight one of the issues that came up strongly as a consequence of local unemployment and impacting the communities in several other



ways. This is the migration of young, able rural people to cities and other urban areas in search of paying jobs.

Unemployment is not only taking young capable people out of the communities but also turning rural places into sites for those who do not find employment, are unemployable or have lost their jobs. This means that coming from rural areas, even those who find paying jobs do not get sustainable employment in urban areas or jobs that offer them sufficient assets, such as good savings to live on during periods of unemployment. A local chief noted that,

Matatiele is a labour pool for the big towns and cities and a sink for the unemployable and this was evident at the height of the pandemic as people who had lost their jobs came back with nothing to offer and they were an extra mouth to feed for their families. The majority especially those working in retail and small businesses such as bartenders and hairdressers are still at home unemployed (Matatiele local chiefs FGD).



This reveals that before the pandemic, members of these rural communities, irrespective of where they were located, did not have a strong and sustainable asset base for their livelihoods, making them easy victims of the negative impacts of the pandemic. Thus, for most members of rural communities, the pandemic did not cause any significant change in terms of being unemployed, as Participant 5 puts it:

There was not any noticeable change because even when COVID-19 hit, I was still unemployed? (Participant 5).



This means that for the unemployed, the pandemic worsened livelihood conditions in terms of other means of earning a living, loss of dependents, and return of those in towns to villages due to loss of employment. Others to whose conditions the pandemic appeared to have made no difference are those who relied on grants before the pandemic and continued to receive their grant consistently during the pandemic.

Lack of proper documentation

Poor documentation, especially birth certificates, which are required to obtain identity documents and access public services, excludes many households from access to sources of livelihood, such as child support grants and even education for children. Participants involved in home-based care and support



of community households shared some of the challenges of communities due to lack of documentation. For example, an FGD participant explained that,

“ *In some households, we identify the children who do not have birth certificates, and some are supposed to receive child support grants but they don't so we assist them and take them to the relevant department like Home Affairs (FGD, WMMLM Home Based Care).* ”

Community members are also unable to address the documentation challenges for reasons such as lack of finances, and other social or family conditions:

“ *In some households, you get emotional because there is an elderly person who lives with a grandchild who doesn't attend school because he/she doesn't have a birth certificate. The mother disappeared after giving birth and never applied for a birth certificate for the child, her whereabouts are unknown and such things do get to you. Even when you try to encourage and advise the elderly she tells you that she doesn't have any money to go to Home Affairs (FGD, WMMLM Home Based Care).* ”



They also pointed out that some children are forced to leave school because they do not have birth certificates and some are unable to obtain higher education because they do not have national identity documents. Yet, assisting these communities has been very challenging for these caregivers as they do not receive sufficient support from some community members and are sometimes treated disrespectfully and suspiciously because they do not have uniforms and are dealing with sensitive documents and information.

The intersection of poor health with poor economic conditions

Many people in rural communities are facing several health conditions. Home based care workers, during the study, report that their efforts to get such people to receive the right medical attention or comply with treatments are challenged primarily by lack of money for transportation and/or access to food.



When you tell these people to take their medication they ask you how would they take it on empty stomachs. You also are in no position to assist them in anyway because you do not have money to buy them food. All you came to do is to tell them to take their medication (FGD WMMLM, Home Based Care).

This made these people, especially the elderly, more vulnerable to COVID-19 and its socio-economic impacts, as their health was already jeopardised, and they were unable to care for themselves due to poverty.

Poor infrastructure and service delivery

Rural communities have some of the worst infrastructures in the country and experience poor delivery of essential services such as sanitation and water supply. This widely documented situation was also an important theme for study participants. As a traditional observed during an FGD;

“To start with, water supply and sanitation services were extremely poor and a lot of people in the villages are still getting their drinking water from unprotected and unreliable springs.”



And another;

“Sanitation facilities are also still very poor. In some cases, in the rush to provide pit latrines, no attention was paid to the location of the facilities resulting in some of them draining into the community springs (FGD with Chiefs, Matatiele)”



There have been efforts in some villages to install taps and supply the communities with safe tap water. However, these were not functioning as they should and did not seem to be maintained by the government. An FGD participant observed that;

There are taps in the village but are not functioning, water comes after 3 months, and the community gets water for domestic use from springs. There was only one Jojo tank installed in the village to assist with a high need for water for covid protocols (FGD with EcoChar).



Poor road infrastructure appears to be one of the major factors affecting several aspects of their wellbeing and socioeconomic lives. It makes it difficult for participants to access services such as health and education, transport goods and earn a living. During an FGD with the Disaster Management Unit of WMMLM, participants named the issue as a longstanding challenge for them as well in terms of delivering required services to communities.



One of them said;



Well, road infrastructure has always been an issue even before COVID-19. You cannot look at the truck and look at our roads they're gravel there is just no way that this truck will be able to meet the 7 minutes that they're supposed to meet in terms of the signs that they are supposed to reach an affected area (FGD, Disaster Management Unit of WMMLM).

The poor roads put communities at risk, and participants cited how this has led to the loss of lives and caused several types of suffering for communities. A traditional leader noted that;

In 2019, 6 people died because of the bad roads. Infrastructure such as roads and bridges in this part of Eastern Cape is a big problem that has been confronted for many years. The rivulets that people cross to connect to the other villages, even school children have got to endure the pain of crossing them, which is extremely risky because they might be

washed away by the heavy water in the small river (FGD, traditional leaders Matatiele).

2019



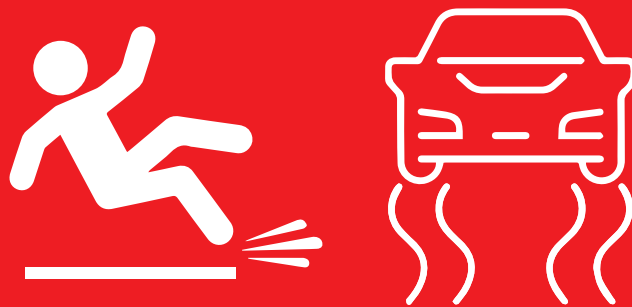
Another traditional leader added that;

“ For example, people of Mkhahlweni cannot go to town when the road is in a bad state, even if there is someone who is very sick, no one can go anywhere. People find it difficult to travel on such poor roads” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM)

Thus, poor roads are a major risk factor for communities and have put their lives at risk and created other difficulties long before the COVID-19 pandemic, making them more likely to be negatively impacted by the pandemic.

During the FGD, ward councillors agreed that the roads and other infrastructure are in a bad state in these rural areas, although some believe that some wards were better than others, especially in terms of access roads: *“And the roads are bad. They are terrible. You travel for two hours from here to town”* (FGD, Ward Councillors WMMLM).

In addition to poor roads, there is lack of a good and effective public transportation systems. These are scarce, not easily accessible and sometimes unavailable for communities, making it difficult to access services. For local businesses, the roads and lack of an effective public transport system made it difficult to procure the resources needed and to supply products. This challenge was explained by one local youth of the charcoal production group, Ecochar, as follows:



Slippery and wet roads



Fortunately, members of the company do not have to travel to town to deliver the charcoal, Inhlabathi fetches packed bags from the site with our storage facility. Challenges were when getting petrol and herbicides in town; it took too long to get to town as we do not have a company car and use public transport. In general, public transport is scarce, available at specific times like in the morning, when the taxi capacity is limited, it is very difficult because people have to take turns... (FGD with Ecochar).

Communities are frustrated that they are neglected by the government and have to protest or disrupt traffic before they receive any response from the municipal government. Often, they just receive explanations without any concrete lasting action. The access roads constructed by municipalities don't last and are not maintained or fixed when damaged. As noted by one participant in the FGD with traditional leaders in Matatiele:

The state of the roads is so bad that there are homes that are totally inaccessible, and even when there is death in the family, and the vehicle that is supposed to go fetch the body can't access the home due to the bad state of the road. So, in order for the people to be heard by the municipality they block the road. School children can't even go to school, no one leaves and no

one comes into the area, only then do we get response from the authorities.

Two other infrastructural and service delivery challenges highlighted by participants were communication and housing. The communication challenges were primarily due to poor connectivity and services being affected by weather conditions.

Thus, “communication is difficult whether people have phones or not the signal is the problem... There is always a communication breakdown with our communities...” (FGD, SaveAct Matatiele). In terms of housing, participants simply noted their poor housing conditions and the government's failure to provide promised IDPs.

Additionally, participants mentioned food insecurity due to unemployment and poor service delivery as well as gender-based violence, as pre-existing challenges that made communities vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19.

Impacts of the pandemic

COVID-19 impacted rural communities in many ways. The results of this study indicates that although several pre-existing conditions and difficulties made rural livelihoods challenging, the pandemic impacted communities in unprecedented ways. Experience of pre-existing challenges did not increase resilience, rather it made them people suffer more from the impacts of the pandemic.

High death rate and related challenges

Many deaths were recorded in these rural communities due to the coronavirus infections and the pandemic. One of the ward councillors noted;

“ *There were a relative number of deaths during the first wave but the second wave was very devastating for us. There were lots of deaths (FGD, Ward Councillors, WMMLM).* ”

High death rates also occurred amongst local chiefs and traditional leaders because of their role in the communities which had put them at high risk of infection and without government support for their personal and communities' safety.

“...If you look at the way many chiefs died when we were first hit by the pandemic it was so scary. May their souls rest in peace. Why did they die, why? That is because we are the kind of people who neglected anything when it comes to government purposes” (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

The fact that community leaders were the ones people contacted first when someone died of COVID-19, and that they had to provide permits, meant that they had to have contact with many people who had been exposed to the virus, and some did not follow protection procedures.



High death

rates also occurred amongst local chiefs and traditional leaders because of their role in the communities.





Another death-related challenge was obtaining death certificates and conducting burials due to the lockdown and other COVID-19-related challenges. Home affairs staff were not available, and relatives had to travel to distant places for these services, despite bad roads and financial challenges, sometimes without receiving the services, while also burying their loved ones at the wrong times.

A traditional leader explained this as follows:

“Home Affairs was at some point closed because someone was infected with the virus so they had to travel from here to Flagstaff if theirs is working or travel to Mt Ayliff if that one is open. But sometimes Flagstaff and Bizana would be closed so all these towns would go to Mt Ayliff. That is how much COVID-19 affected them” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

Due to poverty, loss of means of earning a living, and other financial challenges, community members also lacked the money to bury their loved ones, and the chiefs were not able to assist them financially because they were also poor;

“We can’t even help the poorest families who do not have anything to help them bury their loved ones because we are also poor, we do not get resources to that effect, We only receive our salaries and that’s it (FGD, Traditional Leaders WMMLM).”

Disruption of schooling

The closing of schools disrupted learning and further disadvantaged rural learners. Besides issues of poor connectivity, learners did not have, and could not afford, the right tools for them to continue learning while at home. A traditional leader pointed out that;

“Schools closed down and our children were told to learn online, but they were not provided with tools to help them learn. They did not have data or Wi-Fi to carry on with the schoolwork” (FGD Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

Some learners and their families made efforts to ensure that the learning process continued but this proved too difficult for them to sustain. Connectivity was a problem and it was expensive to travel to town in order to access online study resources. A chief explained:

I know others from this side of Eastern Cape. There is something that is called black Board (a web-based learning platform) and they would always tell us that they were struggling with black Board. They can't connect and they can't really engage with the material that they received from their institutions to be able to do their work properly. They would have to travel from home to town. You would see how vast Bizana is and some would be from Ward 25, the Xolobeni side going to town. Some spent around R120 on a single trip to town and another R120 going back home (FGD Traditional leaders WMMLM).

The closing of schools also had consequences on the communities, for instance, the traditional leaders in Matatiele noted that when children were not at school, they would go to play in the water at the local well or spring, wasting these important resource for the community.

Another impact of the pandemic related to schooling is the loss of interest in education. Some participants reported that their children no longer interested in going to school regularly and were de-motivated. Efforts to send children back to school were not yielding fruits.

Food insecurity

Pre-existing food insecurity was worsened by the job loss as a result of the pandemic and lockdown regulations. People had lost their jobs, yet were restricted from going out to seek other means of surviving because of measures to control the spread of the virus. This was a difficult situation that made the lockdown restrictions seem unreasonable. A traditional leader pointed out that:

“*People lost their jobs and had no food at home but they stayed at home. COVID-19 has made us suffer and we are still suffering now because so many people have lost their jobs.*” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

Gender-based violence

A hike in gender-based violence was observed by participants as one of the noticeable impacts of COVID-19. This particularly concerned the beating of women by their husbands. It came up in conversations with traditional leaders who also argued that this occurred for reasons such as, women being disrespectful, or mocking their husbands. For example participants in the focus group discussions with traditional leaders in Matatiele pointed out that:



Closing of schools



Gender-based violence



“

Just because it is COVID-19, many of our people lost their jobs and spent a lot of time home with the family, so women were being disrespectful of their partners and that is why there were many cases of gender-based violence and that has caused a lot of problems for the communities.

”

The participants further suggested that women were being insensitive on how the job loss was affecting their partners and spoke too much or said things that angered the men:

“

Men don't like women who talk too much; and say things that are not supposed to be said. Sometimes women would mock their spouses to the extent of saying “bring your trouser so that I can go look for a job or work because you cannot work” (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

”

The participants explained the local queen's efforts and challenges to curb gender-based violence in the community such as assisting in resolving disputes between couples and pleading with men to desist from beating their wives, and to be patient, and come to her with their concerns so that she can assist in resolving their disputes.

Difficulty accessing health facilities

During the pandemic, it was difficult for communities to access healthcare services because they were either closed or full. The need to urgently prioritise those infected with COVID-19 meant that people with other health challenges could not receive needed services. A participant gave an example of one of the

major hospitals in Matatiele which services the town and its many rural communities:

“

Hospitals were full and the main ward in Taylor Bequest Hospital was closed for the other patients with another disease as it was the COVID ward, (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele)

”

Loss of livestock through theft

Crime, particularly, theft of livestock heightened in rural communities during the pandemic. This happened locally and involved cross-border by criminal elements across for villages to Lesotho. Traditional leaders shared their experiences:

“

We experience an abnormal rise in stock theft. Many of our animals were crossing the border to Lesotho. Then when you have to go after them trying to chase your animals, especially cows, you will find that you cannot cross the border without testing for the virus which was very costly to some of the poor community members and they find themselves stranded to the extent that some had heart attacks (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

”

And,

“

It has been recognised that some people took advantage of COVID-19 and started stealing animals such cows, cattle and sheep. They steal and load the animals on to their trucks and vans and go sell them to far villages (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

”

Participants felt that regulations were unfair to them because they did not allow them to recover their stolen livestock due to strict requirements to produce negative PCR test results to cross borders. Thus, regulations and financial challenges made it difficult for livestock owners to rescue their livestock.

Inability to engage in cultural practices

The pandemic halted important cultural practices and the consequence was observed in the adverse impacts this had on community members. It also meant that young people had too much free time that they used negatively and could not go through appropriate rites of passage at the right time. The study shows that participants saw this as having both material and physical consequences on individuals and communities. One major cultural practice of concern for participants was the initiation schools which had to close. Traditional leaders argued that;

“ During COVID-19 period there were a lot of problems especially of young uncontrollable boys. These boys would find themselves using drugs because they could not go to the initiation schools, even now as parents we have a problem with how we are going to help these young boys who will eventually go to the initiation schools. We believe that they have too much time on their hands which is why they find time for the drugs (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

”

It would appear from the responses that restricting initiation resulted in a lot of violence, drug use and stress among young people. The responses also suggest that this was because it placed too much time in the hands of young people and was also the consequence of not transitioning from being a boy to being a man at the right age. Thus the violence observed is a reaction or an effect of this;

“ The boys seemed so restless because of the initiation of school, some of them even had depression. The boys had hoped that they will transition into manhood but when that disappears, they tend to use drugs and they became uncontrollable and violent (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

”

The other affected cultural practice was funerals. Participation and rites of funerals had to be modified during the lockdown levels where funerals were allowed. This did not only affect how people engaged in funerals, but also the spiritual significance and value of certain funeral practices.

We used to slaughter a cow for funerals here in our communities but lately because of the pandemic, we slaughter sheep or a goat. It is believed that the animals slaughtered for the funerals are the ones that escort the deceased. This change has left a huge spiritual impact, especially on the black people (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).



Improved business

While the pandemic affected several businesses, some aspects of the economy and the work of local organisations realised growth. For example, SaveAct, which offers financial capital capacity support to rural communities reported increased membership in their programmes by rural farmers who were thinking differently and trying to secure their financial assets due to the negative impact of COVID-19. This increased the demand for their services and more involvement in these communities.

“

...and now some people who were not part of SaveAct have joined and we have more farmers than we previously had, we need to provide more technical support because people are using our services (FGD, SaveAct Matatiele).

Also, the restrictions on cultural funeral practices and the communities' resorting to goats and sheep, since they could no longer slaughter cows to feed mourners given the reduced number of people attending funerals, meant that there was an increased demand for goats and sheep which created or increased business for some farmers.

“

... those who had many sheep and goats realised high demand for their animals as they were used for funerals (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).



Loss of income and food shortages

One of the consistent themes in this study is the fact that many people lost their jobs and means of earning a living during the pandemic. This has been an underlying or intersecting factor in other themes. Participants provided specific examples and other details that could enrich our understanding of the dynamics of job loss during the pandemic and how it affected food and other needs. An FGD participant observed that,

As the pandemic hit and had our lockdown in late March 2020, all our Department of Forestry Fisheries and Environment (DFFE) funded projects were put on hold, meaning participants weren't working and earning an income. They were also not able to get the COVID-19 grant as they were still technically employed by the project... almost 180 people could not work (FGD, LIMA Matatiele).

This was a difficult situation for those affected because they were caught up in a condition where they could not earn due to paused funding but could also not receive government support to cope with the pandemic because of the technical requirements for beneficiaries of such support.

Additionally, the loss of jobs by relatives in urban areas heavily impacted on their families they supported back in the rural areas, and their return home without jobs also created additional stress on their households.

“Income is mainly got from relatives who have employment in the towns and other parts of the country. Most people had to come and settle home, and are adding to the burden of the families having to provide for more people (FGD, Chiefs Matatiele).”

This resulted in what a participant described as a chronic food shortage due to unemployment. For Ecochar, their inability to continue with business due to the pandemic led to the loss of some employees since the pay was not there. A participant summarised the situation as follows;

“Before lockdown, I knew that on a weekly basis or every second week of it, we would deliver charcoal. It has been two months without selling and the charcoal is piling up in the stores. If charcoal is not sold, then employees don't get salaries. For instance three employees have left due to a lack of income, even though they are working every day (FGD, Ecochar).”

For some, finding a new job even after relaxing the lockdown regulations became a challenge. Participant 4 shared his experience:

“My problems began when the lockdown regulations were implemented. We were retrenched from work and were left with nothing. So even now am still looking for a job (Participant 4).”

There are a few participants who also reported that they did not lose their jobs due to COVID-19. Some continued working as usual and some said adjustments were made by their employers without putting them out of the job.

Substance use and abuse

As noted earlier, participants reported increased use and abuse of substances by young people, particularly boys, which they linked to the fact that initiation schools were closed. In addition to this, participants noted that the selling of liquor during the pandemic contributed to the spread of the pandemic and other sicknesses due to the way drinkers drank in groups and shared a single beer jug, as well as the content of local beer. One chief explained,

“People in the villages drink beer in numbers, they don't drink alone therefore that leads to a high rate of infections in our communities, people in the communities share the jug of brewed beer from home and it circulates them up until the beer is finished hence the high rate of infections in communities. This beer that they brew at home is so dangerous because it is a mixer of yeast and water, it doesn't have any nutrition in it except for making those that use it to be sick, they become so dark, and fall sick (FGD, Traditional leaders Matatiele).”

Some traditional leaders blamed the problem of drugs on foreign nationals who live in their communities. One noted that owners of vacant spaza shops rent them to Pakistani and Ethiopian foreign nationals who bring drugs to communities. The presence of these nationals in the rural communities was paralleled with the rise of drug availability and usage.

“I also feel like wherever these people are there is a problem with drugs. They sell drugs to the children; they don't care

*about us and the well-being of our youth.
(FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).*



Coping strategies used during the COVID-19 lockdown

The impact of COVID-19 around the globe has led the governments to employ different approaches to cope with the pandemic. In addition to the usual challenges that households and communities in remote rural areas face, they had to find ways to cope with unusual challenges brought by the pandemic. Based on the results of the study, the government departments, interest groups and community members have employed unique approaches to coping with the COVID-19.

The following were the main coping strategies that were employed by government departments, interest groups and community members: provision of food parcels; reliance on natural and physical resources; producing their food, having home gardens; distribution of seedlings; provision of airtime to those who were working directly with the communities; emotional wellbeing for the employees; support from the funders; training of individuals to produce sanitisers and masks; participation in online courses. The next sub-section briefly discusses some of the coping strategies highlighted above:

Alternative food sources

At the household and individual level, most people started planting vegetables using their home gardens to ensure that they have enough food. Almost all the individuals at the household level who were interviewed indicated that they were involved in subsistence farming during the pandemic. Those who started before COVID-19 were also donating vegetables to poor community members. One of the interest groups interviewed indicated that:

“The pandemic has both highlighted and increased the need for more staff. There is now more home-based food production because people couldn’t go to town to buy things, more and more people are producing their own food” (SaveAct).

Although COVID-19 has severely impacted households, however, it also reminded people to utilise their gardens to plough their vegetables instead of buying them from retail stores with their last cents. In other words, community members had to rely on their natural and physical resources to support themselves and their families during the pandemic. Some interest groups had a seedling distribution programme whereby the seedlings were distributed to those areas in which people were actively involved with farming.



Household and individual level,

most people started planting vegetables using their home gardens to ensure that they have enough food.

At the municipal level including other local businesses, the food parcels were organised for households that were severely affected by the pandemic and the lockdown. The local and district municipality had to coordinate the stakeholders, especially the local businesses who were willing to donate the food parcels. The participant at the district level said:

“*....we coordinated that, so the businesses supported so much with the provision of food parcels to the families that were affected. And then the municipalities from their response budgets tried to provide the food parcels to the affected. homes” (FGD, Disaster Management Unit, WMMLM).*

Building self-reliant groups

The approach used by certain interest groups such as SaveAct within the communities assisted the farmers to be self-sufficient and able to manage their members and groups. Through the training of such organisations, the farmers were able to continue with their activities without depending on those supporting institutions during the pandemic. It became crucial that the government, when providing support to the community, also empowered community members so that they could continue on their own without much dependence on the government.

Introduction of emotional wellness programme

The COVID-19 pandemic had a serious impact on all aspects of social and economic life. Certain organisations created wellness programmes for

their employees to cope with the pandemic. Employees, as well as the general members of the community, started to experience fear, anxiety and depression when the restrictions were imposed. Uncertainty about employment and finances, feelings of vulnerability to the infection and fears of safety and wellbeing of the loved ones increased during this period. Other interest groups that operated in these areas created wellness programmes for their employees to cope with the stress, fear and anxiety due to the pandemic. Other interest groups operating in these areas offered motivation to the members of the communities. One of the interest groups stipulated that:

“*First and foremost what the organisation has done that I personally appreciate which was not there before, it was the introduction of the emotional wellness programme because as we have said there was a serious burnout and I was the number one victim. We were burned out and we were just going because we had to go. So, the emotional wellbeing sessions from different stakeholders that deal with emotional programmes have been helpful even though they are not very consistent and I think they came at a time when we were already out. But that has kept some of us where we are. That's one of the things” (SaveAct).*

Reduced expenditure and remittance

The financial status within the households had changed during the pandemic as some family members lost their jobs and received salary cuts. Thus, most households experienced



financial strains as the majority of the household members had to depend on lower income from social support grants and on those who were lucky to continue working during the pandemic. The loss of job or salary cuts did not only affect the individuals who were working but the whole household that was dependent on them. As most people were losing their jobs during the period, this means that the level of unemployment increased as few or no job opportunities were created. However, members of the community were not discouraged to continue searching for job opportunities, especially temporary jobs, to supplement their salary income. Here under are some responses from the household members which supplement the information provided above:

I encountered financial strains due to lower income” (Participant 11).

“Yes, it has changed because I am now only working for 4 hours and 2 days per week” (Participant 8).

“Life has been rough. There are times when I did not receive any financial assistance from my sister who used to be my main provider. This is because some factories and companies had to close their door due to COVID-19. Before COVID-19, I was receiving money from my older sister” (Participant 9).

“During the lockdown, I had to look for another job because my employer reduced our days and working hours. So I had to look for a second job that was going to help me substitute my income” (Participant 3).

The pre-existing conditions and other socio-demographic factors influenced the coping strategies that both government and community members had to adopt during the pandemic. The following section briefly discusses the adherence to COVID-19 regulations by the community members as well as other groups during the pandemic.

Adherence to COVID-19 protocols

The South African government worked hard to optimise the state of preparedness in response to COVID-19. The declaration of the national state of disaster and the announcement of a ‘hard’ lockdown by the President towards the end of March 2022 were part of the government’s efforts to minimise the spread of COVID-19 in the country. The government developed a five-stage countrywide lockdown strategy that aimed to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, and lockdown restrictions/regulations were also developed. There was a mixed reaction from community members about the strategy and the lockdown restrictions; others supported it while others showed a dismissive attitude towards it. The results of the study show that some members of the community were adhering to the COVID-19 regulations, while others were not. Interviewed participants stipulated the following regarding the adherence to COVID-19 regulations: it was difficult to manage funerals (they were super spreader) and cross provincial boundaries; people were not wearing masks; no registers for funerals were utilised for tracking purposes; funeral attendance exceeded the capacity stipulated; people were unaware of COVID-19 in the beginning; life was normal to

majority of community members; lack of proper resources to work remotely; virtual meetings to adhere to the regulations; working in shifts; and there was lack of water (washing hands – not possible due to lack of water).

The municipality had to play a crucial role in engaging other stakeholders such as salons and funeral parlours to ensure that they put measures in place in ensuring that their clients adhere to COVID-19 regulations. One of the municipal officials indicated that:

“*to help the salons especially adhere to COVID-19 regulations (people at the salons were more relaxed and didn't even wear face masks; as well as funeral parlours) were closely monitored and assisted to play a big role*” (FGD, Communication and Public Participant, WMML). ”

Furthermore, the municipality as well as the local interest groups that worked directly with the communities where the study was conducted put in place measures for their employees to comply with the COVID-19 regulations. Employees were provided with resources to enable them work remotely and the number of employees going to offices was reduced. The

municipality had to find new ways of communicating with the members of the public. For instance, social media platforms, loud hailing and virtual meetings had to be used to ensure that COVID-19 information is distributed widely. Responses from the municipal officials regarding how the officials responded to COVID-19 regulations:

“On my side, it wasn't that challenging because I actually realised that my work is in my laptop and until there was a pandemic I didn't realise that I can actually work from home because everything that I needed was in my laptop” (FGD, Communication and Public Participant, Matatiele)

“In terms of working, the municipality did prioritise the COVID-19 regulations because we would work in shifts. We would only take shifts when we were not too busy; we would just work from home” (FGD, Communication and Public Participant, Matatiele).

“We also had to change our mode of communication. We used to have referral meetings, face to face but we started using virtual meetings” (FGD, Communication and Public Participant, Matatiele).





Local representatives such as councillors and traditional leaders had to play a role in ensuring that people comply with the regulation by distributing the information to the communities regarding the COVID-19. However, the structure of traditional leaders was not supported with sanitisers and masks to ensure that they are also protected when they help the communities as they were also involved in issuing the travelling permits.

“

We were obliged to restrict the movement of the community members. The chief had to adapt to the filling up of the movement permit, which was really new too. This was the most horrifying time ever. We did not have masks and every day I would meet so many members of the community who would come for the services” (FGD, Traditional leaders Mtatiele).

”

Although there were structures that played a big role in ensuring that community members adhered to COVID-19 regulations, however, certain barriers made it difficult for people to adhere to COVID-19 protocols. For example, the existing socio-economic status of the communities such as lack of water, high level of unemployment and poverty were the main contributors to the non-adherence to the regulations. The COVID-19 related activities were coordinated by different stakeholders that were involved.

Coordination of COVID-19 activities

During the ‘hard’ lockdown, the South African government created various coordination

mechanisms to facilitate the COVID-19 response. From the results of the study, it can be highlighted that the integrated government relations were not well coordinated from the start. However, the Joint Operations Committee (JOC) was then created to coordinate all COVID-19-related activities. The committee assisted the local and district municipalities to be able to provide input on what was happening on the ground to the National Coronavirus Command Council. Both local and district municipalities as well as other interest groups operating in these areas had to change their modes of communication and had to reprioritise municipal programmes and projects that were initially planned. They had to work in a coordinated manner to ensure that relevant, factual, and timely information was shared with members of the public. Also, they had to ensure that they worked together with local businesses, traditional leaders, and other community representatives in distributing COVID-19 - related information to the members of the community. One of the participants from the municipal level stated that:

“I know that there was a COVID-19 Command Council that was established for the local and I also know that there was a programme that was introduced by the Premier, the Rapid Response Teams, in each ward they had to identify certain people. It was developed specifically for COVID-19 purposes. I think it comprised of the people who had to share information of COVID-19 issues within the ward space, and if there was information that needed to be communicated. They were more like a link between the ward councillor and from

ward councillor to the municipality” (FGD, Communication and Public Participation, Matatiele).

Although there were structures created specifically for COVID-19, there was no coordination of activities of those interest groups that had programmes that could positively assist the government in reducing the load that the government had during this period of the pandemic. For instance, there are organisations in these areas that encourage sustainable livelihoods and who educate the public about the importance of hygiene. One of the interest groups interviewed indicated that:

“Another aspect of the work is Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in collaboration with CSA that is used to educate communities from all demographic groups about the importance of being hygienic and ways it maintaining that level of hygiene” (FGD, LIMA).

The coordination mechanisms created by municipal and district governments in both areas maintained smooth information and decision-making flow. The coordination mechanisms also enabled an effective working relationship between various organisations that were involved during the pandemic. The local and district leadership was crucial in ensuring that COVID-19-related activities are well coordinated.

Readiness of government institutions in responding to the pandemic

The unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic has devastated and disrupted the world. It has led to a multitude of cross-cutting crises that affect our socio-economic networks, our humanitarian systems and our governance frameworks. As governments continue to face unprecedented governance challenges, the pandemic has uncovered gaps in both government coordination and the use of evidence for policy making, which directly affects the nature and quality of the measures adopted to tackle the crisis and its aftermath. The challenges have led to several quick fixes and agile responses, which will need to be assessed when the worst of the crisis is over. The focus group interview with members of the Disaster management group at the WMMLM expressed that the pandemic caught all government sectors by surprise as the world never anticipated for such to take place. Below is what some of them had to say:

“As you have just said that we didn’t see it coming and if you would look at most of the studies that have been done, all the documents that are out there, are mostly focused on the natural and man-made disasters and the biological ones relating to COVID-19 and everything, we have never planned for such issues” (FGD, Disaster Management Unit, WMMLM).

Another participant had this to say:

“But when it comes to natural disasters and man-made disasters, it is where we always put our focus and not on the pandemics.



So, when it comes to COVID-19 we were not really prepared because it is not anything that we were ever exposed to. We have always been treating whatever health-related issue using the contingency plans from that department which is affected, which is the Department of Health at this point. We didn't have a plan in place to deal with such issues. As a result, we found ourselves moving from one pillar to the next pillar because now we had to find out how to deal more especially when there was hard lockdown" (FGD, Disaster Management Unit, WMMLM).

Grounded on the latter finding, one can argue that the crisis put governments in a challenging situation where they had to ensure clear, trusted and legitimate decision-making processes informed by the best available evidence, while there were many “unknown unknowns” and the time allowed for dialogue and gathering information was extremely limited. In many cases, this was seen as the best possible approach to dealing with such a high level of uncertainty. Issues such as trust in government and trust in expert advice and the boundary between the experts and the political decision-making interface were brought to the fore by the crisis. Governments were faced with the need to synthesise information from multiple sources and actors, and to use it to feed into governments’ plans and responses to the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis.

Satisfaction with government response

The analysis below focuses on findings obtained on government response during a disaster. The

findings are centred on the availability of clean tap water, taps, water tanks and roads. Traditional leaders interviewed at the WMMLM expressed complete satisfaction with the manner in which their municipality was swift in responding to service delivery before and during the pandemic. Four of these traditional leaders had this to say:

“Things are better now because the government has finally provided us with tap water” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

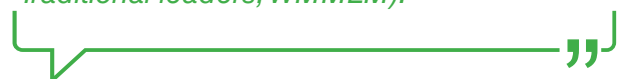
“We were just provided with water taps recently so we have not experienced any problem” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

“When there is a pipe burst, the municipality sends people to fix the problem immediately and we continue to have water” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

“The municipality covers all the costs, we do not pay anything” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

Another traditional leader had this to say:

“I would not complain much about water because we do have water in my area even though there are some areas that still don't have water. I would hear that in those areas that don't have water there is a water tank but then the next thing water is not provided in those tanks after a while and you don't even know why. I did ask the councillors but I do not know how far did they go with that? The municipality and councillors exclude the traditional leaders and now I don't know how they resolved this issue but all I know is that there is water in some areas while in some areas there is no water” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).



However, not all traditional leaders at the WMMLM shared the same sentiments. Some of the traditional leaders complained about the shortage of water. This was because not all wards under the WMMLM had access to water tanks or tap water. For those wards that were provided with tanks, once the tanks ran out of water, the municipality would not send trucks to refill those tanks. This is what some of the participants had to say:

“Yes, they did bring water twice and after that, they left those tanks dry even though COVID-19 was still hitting. As we speak, those tanks are dry, they have no water and it's been like that for a while now” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM)

“Water tanks are brought by Ward Councillors and not the chiefs so they simply told us that they would bring water tanks I did see them in my village and people got water but then the truck stopped bringing water and we were left without water. I think the councillor can give reasons for this” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

The findings obtained in this study also revealed that the location of these water tanks was also problematic and posed a big challenge to some community members. This is what some of the traditional leaders had to say:

“With regards to water, we do not have water because sometimes you would find that the municipality would promise to bring a water tank to the community and it would be placed very far from other households and the water doesn't come on time but

after some time they did not bring it at, all and people had no water to wash their hands regularly” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

“Let me also take this opportunity and try to assist the meeting, there is a distinction between a ward and a village because a ward consists of many villages. I am from Khanyayo village and we have one water tank which is placed at school and it did not manage to cover the whole village. They did bring the water tank but the area at the top did not get any water tank because we were provided with tap water but the problem is that the water comes and goes. But I did see one water tank there” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

“Also in my village, we did have water tanks and it somehow caused tension in the community because the tank would be placed in one place and some people can hardly reach it because the ward is big and some people can't access the water from the tank. Some tanks were vandalised by the community because they would say it's better if there was no tank at all. But some tanks in Ward 3 did help people even though some were vandalised by the community saying they are useless because only some people are able to reach the tank because the area is wide. These water tanks are not provided in a way that would cater for everyone, or even be provided in stages. That is one of the things that I saw as a problem in this issue of water. They did provide us with water but then stopped and did not even give reasons why they stopped” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).



Security and control of the operation of water taps were also identified to be a challenge that ward members were faced with. This is what one traditional leader had to say:

“

Also on the tap issue, we do have water taps in my village. In some villages, there is no water coming out of those taps and this has been the case for a while. You would find that there is only one tap that caters for the whole community which operates at certain times. There is a person who is employed by the municipality to open the tap at 10 am and close it at 3 pm in some instances. The two taps that are working operate on diesel but most of them are not working. We do not know where the problem is because the municipality does not communicate with us. The two taps are working and diesel is provided by the municipality and at certain times we get water, but most of them are not working” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

”

Traditional leaders interviewed at the Matatiele local municipality had differing opinions. These traditional leaders were not satisfied with how the government responded before and during the pandemic. The responses below also focus on the availability of clean tap water, taps, water tanks and roads. This is what some of them had to say:

“

I do like my municipality but what the mayor is doing is not great at all. The mayor was in the newspaper called the voice of Matatiele, talking about the pandemic and how people are affected by this disease. He was at the village of St Paul. This happened at the beginning of

the pandemic but up to now the mayor has not been to my village he is still teaching people about COVID-19, in St Paul because ever since that one visit we have not heard of the mayor's visit to any village” (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

Grounded on the latter response, one can concur that such a poor response from the government has been left by many communities in South Africa. Not much was done by the government to respond and assist different communities. Thus, people were forced to seek alternative coping strategies. NGOs and traditional leaders were able to assist where the government had lacked. However, the intervention of traditional leaders was not always welcomed with open arms by some municipalities. For example, this is what some of the respondents had to say:

“

With regards to the issue of councillors, when you go to the municipality as a traditional leader you do not get the attention that you want if you are not with your councillor. It is your councillor that should go and speak to the municipality on your behalf. Even with all these development issues, we are not told anything, everything comes through the councillor” (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

“In some areas, the traditional leader and the councillor are not on good terms and there the traditional leader is always in the dark. No one cares to inform the traditional leader about any development/project that would take place in the area, they only see when things happen. When councillors are going to hold community meetings they

are supposed to inform their traditional leaders but in some instances they don't, you only realise that there is a meeting when you see people going to the hall" (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

Findings obtained in this study also revealed that there is no working relationship between government (councillors) and traditional leaders. As a result, traditional leaders are sometimes unable to fully render their services or assist community members during disasters. Below is what one of the traditional leaders had to say:

"If I start my journey in the chieftaincy no one will assist me with anything, I will learn everything as I go. I want to make it clear that we are on our own, we do not get resources from anywhere. Even when you help people with death certificates you have no idea how to and you just go and struggle there at Home Affairs until you learn how it's done. We buy the stamp that we use ourselves" (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

The study findings revealed that poor government response was not only visible through the unavailability of water in the WMMLM and the Matatiela local municipality. However, these two municipalities also faced challenges with road infrastructure. This is what some of the respondents had to say:

"Just like the issue of roads, you would find that there are plans to repair a certain road but then things change and they say they would only fix the seriously terrible parts of this road because it is in a very bad condition. In the end, we do not get

help and people cannot move around because the road is terrible, sick people can't even go to the doctor/hospital because the roads are inaccessible, you can't drive on them. It gets worse when it is a rainy season and the roads get wet" (FGD, Traditional Leaders, WMMLM).

"In addition to this issue of roads, in some instances, there is road construction in your area and no one bothered to inform the traditional leader about it. You keep quiet because you don't want to interrupt development. They construct the road, finish it and it is approved but it is in bad condition right after they fix it" (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

Another respondent had this to say:

"We are not involved even when the road is being handed over once completed, there is no involvement at all. No one calls us to tell us that the contractor has finished the work now and it is approved or with any other project we are not told when it has been finalised so that we can also assess it. The roads are fixed and are damaged within three months after they have been fixed. And they know that they take forever before they come to fix our roads again but they don't do work that will last longer" (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

"Once contractors finish their work they disappear, we hear their vehicles leaving at night". (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).



Impacts of Infrastructure in responding

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the South African economy was already looking grim. When covid hit, infrastructure development was disrupted in an unprecedented manner as the movement restrictions slowed down production. Findings obtained from a focus group with chiefs from the Matatiele and the WMMLM revealed that both municipalities were no exception from the many municipalities whose infrastructure and service delivery was impacted by the pandemic. Below is what some of the chiefs in Matatiele had to say:

“Transport has become unaffordable for rural residents” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

“There is no dedicated transport for sick people so passengers have to ride with sick people, in these vans. This has resulted in the rise of infections in the rural villages” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

A community member in the WMMLM also had this to say:

“The municipality does have a maintenance plan but of course has a planned road construction according to the budget as well as the IDP. So those roads which were budgeted for the financial year 2019/20 were done and then the road maintenance which was supposed to be done by the municipality according to the plan, that one was sustained. Also, as we are saying, even us when we held meetings, we went to the wards, we had to travel to wards and we managed to reach the areas for

our gatherings” (FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM).

Transport poverty is what many rural communities in South Africa are challenged with and the above responses attest to the issue that remains problematic. Even though a lot of planning did take place at the national level, numerous factors, including the level 5 restrictions that restricted the movement of people, negatively impacted the implementation of such plans. The latter is supported by the findings obtained in this study. This is what another community member of the WMMLM had to say:

“Of course, the road infrastructure is one example that requires regular maintenance since they are destroyed by the rains. So, it’s something that is continuous because the municipality has a master plan for road maintenance and does its construction according to the budgeted prioritised roads. That is the plan which is incorporated in our IDP”. (FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM).

“Another thing is that level 5 didn’t allow any work to be done. Even the service providers had to leave sites. Road construction was affected because service providers had to leave sites until the regulations that provided certain permits which allowed people to do certain kinds of work were made available. But before these were available everything was put on hold”. (FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM).

It was also evident in the findings that the poor state of roads affected service delivery. As a result, delivery of water tanks and taps could not be made possible. This is what one participant had to say:

“During the pandemic, the district placed empty water tanks at strategic and accessible localities so the community could access the water easily. Unfortunately, most of these tanks were never filled as the tankers bringing the water failed to arrive due to the poor state of the roads. Some of the tanks were also stolen.” (FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM).

In a discussion with members from SaveAct, they revealed that connectivity and network coverage also poses a big challenge in their communities. This is what some of them had to say:

“There is very limited network coverage, especially in the remote rural areas, which is a major problem, especially in emergency situations” (FGD, SaveAct).

“Communication will always be a challenge even if people have a cell phone, due to signal, for instance in Marizell, people mostly use Vodacom and when the weather is not good it is interrupted. There is also a change of phone numbers by the savings group’s members without notifying field officers. The traditional way of communicating through neighbours still works” (FGD, SaveAct).

Barriers to responding to the impacts of the pandemic

Substance abuse

When one is in a restrained situation and dealing with stressors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, an inability to go to work, see friends, experiencing feelings of isolation, financial stress, anxiety caused by outside events or even conflict at home, the use of alcohol and other substances can often be seen as a way to cope. However, the opposite is true. Over time, the effects of alcohol use to deal with stress have less of a calming effect, and the expected benefit shifts to depression and anxiety induced by alcohol and substance use. As the COVID-19 restrictions became tighter, a lot of people developed a dependency on alcohol and other drugs. Even though the consumption of alcohol in public spaces, selling and purchasing was restricted, many people did not adhere to this regulation and continued unabated. Traditional leaders at the Matatiele local municipality shared the following:

“Selling liquor was also a problem to the pub owners. People in the villages drink beer in numbers, they don’t drink alone, therefore that leads to a high rate of infections in our communities, people in the communities share the jug of brewed beer from home and it circulates around them up until the beer is finished hence the high rate of infections in communities. This beer that they brew at home is so dangerous because it is a mixer of yeast and water, it doesn’t have any nutrition in it except making those that use it sick, they become so dark, and fall sick.” (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).



Lack of resources

The shortage of PPEs (facemasks and gloves), scarcity of hand cleaning solutions (sanitisers), and inadequate training and trained staff, traditional leaders and community members were the most common barriers that influence the practice of preventive measures. Similarly, unavailability of guidelines, water shortage, lack of duty, and emergency rooms were also pointed out by key informants. Below is what some of the traditional leaders from the Matatiele local municipality had to say:

“Chiefs were provided with some sanitisers and masks for the community. These were not nearly enough for the number of people in the many villages under each chief.” (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

Another chief had the following to say:

“Communication was there on how this disease is transmitted from one person to another. We were obliged to restrict the movement of the community members. The chief had to adapt to the filling up of the movement permit, which was really new too. This was the most horrifying time ever. We did not have masks and each day as the chief I would meet so many members of the community who would come for the services. Some came for permits, some come for the confirmation of death documents, and they would come with different requests every day. Our lives were in danger we were at high risk of losing our loved ones or even our lives. There were no masks and hand sanitisers. We were given only the forms to issue

movement permits. We lived like that with the virus amongst us. As chiefs, whether there is COVID -19 or not, they still have responsibilities and duties to carry out. We had to be in virtual meetings but there was no provision of data, once more we had to dig in our pockets again, and the repercussion of all that is that as the chiefs, we lost a lot of money” (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

Another chief had this to say:

“By the time we received the hand sanitisers, it was too late and we had already practised social distancing as we use to hold our meeting outside in a well-ventilated area trying not to find ourselves in a congested area. On some days you find that you have to meet 10 people at the same time hence the meetings were held outside. Remember people here don’t wear masks and we have no hand sanitisers (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

“You also find that even other departments do not have money to respond to disaster issues. I will give this example, I remember when we came back to the activity that we needed bigger space for instance in schools we needed a bigger space because now we were talking about social distancing so we needed bigger space to accommodate our school children. So, therefore the fact that it’s going to be this group now and another group there. So, we found that the Department of Education doesn’t have funds to provide space, doesn’t have funds to provide sanitisers,

PPE and everything else. It is after we had actually conscientised them in saying it is your responsibility, it is your children, it is your mandate, it is your function then you need to plan, you need to finance it. So, it is then that it started getting into people's minds that 'oh, so now it is my responsibility to plan for whatever mishap that can happen to our unit'. That's all the issues that happened" (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

Grounded on the latter finding, one can argue that the impact of COVID-19 on a broken and unequal education system highlights how students from poorer communities were cut off from education during extended school closures, in a country where just 10 per cent of households have an internet connection. Meanwhile, historic underinvestment and the government's failure to address existing inequalities have resulted in many schools not having running water or proper toilets whilst struggling with overcrowded classrooms, meaning they could provide a safe learning environment amid the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic made a broken and unequal system even worse, putting students from poorer communities at an even greater disadvantage. One can argue that, unless urgent access is taken, the future livelihoods of an entire generation will be at risk.

Another participant from the FGD with the Disaster Management Unit in WMMLM had this to say:

"The Department of Human Settlements another issue that we had, remember there are settlements that are congested just in

nature because there is a high number of people because of the level of poverty in those areas. You find that even when you want to isolate the person that has tested positive for COVID-19 you can't isolate the person because there is nowhere to take them because there is no space, and yet the person is still waiting for the results you cannot take them to quarantine. So we had to work with the Department of Human Settlements to say ok fine, provide us then with temporal shelters just so that we could ease the households of the number of people that they have".

"And COVID-19 exposed us in terms of we're not doing enough, we're not employing our resources enough for the people and as such I don't think that we are still supposed to be scratching our heads in terms of human settlements and accommodating people. We're still not supposed to be scratching our heads with regards to sanitation, water provision because those are the things that we are supposed to be providing".

A participant in the FGD with LIMA reported that they emphasized the issue of unemployment that was created by the pandemic. This is what the participant had to say:

"As the pandemic hit and had our lockdown in late March 2020, all our Department of Forestry Fisheries and Environment (DFFE) funded projects were put on hold, meaning participants weren't working and earning an income" (FGD, LIMA).



The latter finding is consistent with findings from a study conducted by The World Bank in 2021. The findings from the World Bank study revealed that job losses in COVID-19 times are disproportionately concentrated among low-income earners, worsening already severe inequalities despite the government's decisive and pro-poor response with transfer program that partially cushioned the negative impacts of the pandemic. Low-wage workers suffered almost four times more job losses than high-wage earners. In addition, the report shows that the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has exposed structural weaknesses in the job market. Drawing from the responses from the participants of this current study, young people, in particular face acute unemployment rates, with incidence twice as high as among older age groups.

Water

Water is essential for drinking, sanitation, and food production; for billions of people, however, water access and quality are limited. The COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified the impacts of the water inequalities. COVID-19 has, like nothing that has gone before, revealed the systems wiring of the modern, globalised world, and how destructive disturbances to those systems can be. Participants in the FGD with SaveAct had the following to say:

“SaveAct had made plans to intervene but seems like the proposal failed. When COVID started last year, a meeting was held to identify areas that have a need for irrigation systems and made a proposal for water with a linkage to the water service

authority, ANDM to ensure that there is a direct intervention”.

“These communities where people have to go outside, travel long distances to get water which they use for cooking, cleaning, washing and now you add another component to it – the hygienic component. Not to say that it wasn't there from the get-go but now because the COVID-19 pandemic requires you to be more hygienic”.

Water is a connector across these systems, and thus has critical implications for both the effectiveness of COVID-19 response efforts and for promoting growth and building resilience in a post-pandemic world. COVID-19 shined a harsh spotlight on the inequalities, hardships, and global health risks that result from the collective failure to uphold the human right to water and sanitation. In many disadvantaged communities in South Africa, a lack of water supply and sanitation deprives people of their most basic protections against the spread of the virus.

Participants in the FGD with the WMMLM Home Based care had the following to say:

“There is a critical issue here, we as councillors or local sphere are experiencing a lot of challenges because a lot of issues are just here, not in the province, not in the district, not in the national. People heard on the radio or on TV that we must wash our hands regularly, but they are asking ‘where will we get the water to wash our hands?’ The President says we must wear masks, and wash our

hands with soap but there are families where they don't even spend R5 a day and where will they get soap to wash their hands, and water because they have been struggling to even drink and cook but now where they will get water to wash hands?"

"That is why we are saying proof that local government really is faced with lots of challenges. If really one day they can see this that the resources are taken from national, provincial to the local, I think it's where we going to then be able to serve our people and also make sure that their dignity is really respected. I just wanted to say about that..."

Neglect by the government

A traditional leader under the Matatiele municipality expressed that they felt as if the government neglected them during the pandemic and focused on those in urban areas. This is what some of them had to say:

"I have two things that I have to add to those that spoke before me. We did not know about this virus; we are all learning how to live with it. I, therefore, ask other leaders not to hold on to the information on this pandemic, let all share including that small sanitiser it can still do some difference. Chiefs let us all protect the lives of our community members together by sharing all that we know with each other" (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

"Here in our villages people feel neglected by the government and even those that appear on television, when they give

numbers of the daily infections, they were reading only big cities, so here in the villages people believed that there is no COVID -19 in Matatiele as a result, many people have lost their lives" (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

Poor coordination

During the focus discussion with the Chiefs from the Matatiele local municipality and the Disaster Management Unit from the WMMLM, participants noted the issue of poor coordination, lack of awareness and education as other issues that lead to the fast spread of the virus and death. This is what some of them had to say:

"Again the over-promising led to a lot of people coming to the chiefs' homes with no regard for safety" (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

"A lot of chiefs and headmen died during this period as they were not taught how to protect themselves while continuing to render normal services to the communities such as death notifications, dealing with issues of stock theft and a myriad of other community issues". (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

"Another thing that happened was the issue of coordination. People have always anticipated or understood disaster management from a response perspective. When I say response perspective, they do not have to understand or know the disaster management or the disaster reduction part of it. They always look at it from a disaster response perspective. So, the integrated



government relations were not really well coordinated from the start” (FGD, Disaster management, WMMLM).

Poor infrastructure and public services

Participants interviewed at the WMMLM stated that the key major issue that created a barrier to the response to the pandemic was poor service. Below is what some of them had to say:

“There is not enough water. The municipality tried to give out Jojo tanks, but there are no roads to deliver those tanks, infrastructure is a permanent difficulty here in Matatiele. When the municipality had to deliver the tanks hit a hard rock as the roads here are gravel and extremely slippery when it is raining which makes it difficult to access other remote areas”. (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

“Lastly on this issue of water, I ended up taking one of the water tanks and asked that it should be placed at the palace to save it from vandals because it was not enough for the whole village and even the community suggested that it’s better if it’s placed in the palace to protect it and make sure that it is accessible to everyone. That is one tank that survived and the community said this was a better option that would ensure that it is accessible to everyone. (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

The above findings are supported by Hove et al. (2022) who argued that in rural communities around the world, lack of clean water and sanitation are major contributors to avoidable deaths and diseases. Grounded on the latter, one can argue that lack of clean water increases vulnerability to conditions including diarrhoea, malnutrition, malaria, lymphatic filariasis, intestinal nematode infections, trachoma and schistosomiasis. The delay in the delivery of water tanks at the WMMLM could have played a role in the exacerbation of the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the key regulations to stop the spread was the washing of hands.

Other participants had the following to say:

“The issue of water here at Winnie Madikizela-Mandela municipality is not our mandate, it is a district mandate but in terms of numbers on the field, I think it’s about 10% of the people who are getting (bulk/reticulated) water in our area. But we have the dam where we get our water but the issue that we have is money, same (problem) applies to the roads. We are given little money and all that we are doing is being determined by the money that we get, not by the problems that are experienced from the ground” (FGD, Ward councilors, WMMLM).

“Same applies with the water, you know in our area we don’t have that billing system, the municipality does not bill people, they are still getting that standard tank of 400 litres but one thing that has happened since they are not billed by the district, they are just extracting water from that stand-alone pipe to their houses” (FGD, Ward councillors, WMMLM).

“It means now we don’t have meters in our areas where the municipality is going to bill these people in order to pay, except in town. In town they have meters, they are billing them and I don’t think there is much in terms of it happening but one thing that the town usually experiences is when the water is not coming out of the taps, bursting of pipes, all those things. But the Alfred Nzo municipality is responding to all those pipe bursts and taps but in our areas, we still have a lot of areas/wards of this municipality which do not have water. But now I think we are waiting for the programme to provide water to those areas. I think at the end of the day, madam we have now what we are saying, whereby after all people have water, they will start having that programme of billing them where now we talk of buying, they give and we pay. But in terms of the one that we get from boreholes, because we were using generators that operate on diesel you would find that the diesel that we have is sometimes running out. People end up not having water, they have to wait for the truck to bring diesel, because they are using engines. Now the water is there but there is no source to bring water to the people. It means they are still experiencing problems in terms of supplying the diesel” (FGD, Ward councillors, WMMLM).

The findings in the study also revealed that the poor state of many South African roads also had a negative to the delivery of services on time. This is what some of the participants at the WMMLM had to say:

“Traditional leaders lost their power because in the past traditional leadership was strong and nothing was standing in its way. Even the roads were in a good state because we used local shops that were ran by white people, they always made sure that the roads were in a good condition, they would always grade the gravel roads. After all, they didn’t want to drive their cars on terrible roads. So even though these roads were gravel, they were always in a good, drivable condition” (FGD, Ward councillors, WMMLM).

“As a result that has created a gap between us the government and the community because during that time the President announced regulations and said that when we attend funerals, the funeral must be one hour, only 150 people must attend the funeral and the bodies must not stay at home they must be transported on the day of the burial and that there must be no night vigil. But you would find that the people who are not having proper networks were not adhering to these protocols. Secondly, they know that if there is no road, there would be no police that would go to those areas to enforce the law. It means the issue of road infrastructure is very important, the one that we are still experiencing difficulty in our areas here in Winnie Madikizela-Mandela Municipality” (FGD, Ward councillors, WMMLM).

Another challenge that was highlighted by the participants was the issue of temporary shelters and temporarily hospitals not being able to accommodate all those that had contracted the virus. This is what one of the participants had to say:

“Just to touch on the issue of money, we were also getting the money for service delivery because COGTA, National Treasury since they had seen the situation also gave us some money to make sure that we speed up some of the problems. In other areas, there were also temporary hospitals that were built because they knew that the situation was very difficult but in our area, we didn’t have any hospital but there was a promise (inaudible) whereby they were about to build a temporal shelter for those people to isolate. Also, we have got some centres that were trying to prepare for isolation, but even there we have paid some monies during that time. I am trying to say where we assisted. Even the workers because there were workers who were on special days now as the municipality we had to pay those workers that were keen to work during that time (the volunteers) because you know all of us had to stay at home but there were special workers that were there even in bad times, on the frontline”. (FGD, Ward councillors, WMMLM).

Social resources or networks involved in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

Civil societies and non-governmental organisations

COVID-19 created an extraordinary social situation in which governments struggle to mitigate the harmful consequences of the pandemic. Thus, civil society and non-governmental organisations assisted many communities during disaster outbreaks. Study participants from Lima revealed that Water

Security Project Steering Committee played a big role in drawing people for community participation. Below is what one member said:

“One important forum is the Water security Project Steering Committee (PSC), which started as a steering committee for the GreenTrust project and is now providing a forum for all water security work in the catchment. PSC is made up of all six Traditional Authority (TA) representatives within our project footprint, ANDM, Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) and Matatiele Local Municipality (MLM) and provided the most useful tool in drawing people in. Have made connections with people (champions) from both the local and district municipality that are more enthusiastic about these kinds of initiatives to influence their colleagues because it has been difficult to draw in members of the local and district municipality to come to these forums, listen and provide support where needed” (FGD, LIMA).

Study participants from SaveAct had the following to say:

“The main active partner is Matotomane College, a local private agricultural institution. They are seedling suppliers and distributors since the pandemic. Also partnered with them doing a few field activities in training farmers through their social responsibility component. Other partners, ERS, have small meetings not partnering in main activities. Mahlathini organics provides training by their officers” (FGD, SaveAct).

In the wake of the pandemic, NGOs adapted their existing programmes to operate remotely or with physical distancing. Since these organisations were already intimately connected with their constituents, they did their best to respond to immediate needs in new ways. For example, Matotomane College which is mentioned in the above finding responded to the food insecurity experienced in the Matatiele local community by starting an initiative of distributing seedlings. This organisation ensured that community members had adequate supplies during the lockdown.

Members of communication and public participation in the WMMLM also said that the *“Business Chamber was on board in terms of support”* (FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM). The participant further noted that *“Religious fraternity were on board, especially on the side of educating the communities”* (FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM). Other participants in the same FGD noted that;

“Different political parties were also assisting in terms of mobilising people” FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM).

“The NGOs especially Melo would donate masks, sanitisers, they tried to help the saloons especially adhere to COVID-19 regulations because people at the saloons were more relaxed and didn’t even wear face masks” FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM).

“As well as funeral parlours they were closely monitored and assisted (inaudible) really played a big role” FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM).

“There are NGOs like LIMA and ERS helping us to do springs protection so that we may drink clean water to help reduce diseases and infections and also getting the experience of building springs” “NGO’s like EcoChamps were doing awareness campaigns in our communities and it was helpful because we were complying” (FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM).

Grounded on the latter responses, one can argue that civil society groups have played an integral role in responding to the COVID-19 social crisis in South Africa. As the crisis dragged on and evolved, these activist groups continued to respond to the growing and diversifying needs, just when access to resources became more insecure for many of them. As evident in this study, several organisations in our study served a range of vulnerable populations and demonstrated a deep understanding of their needs during the pandemic. However, it cannot be overlooked that some of these organisations have experienced crippling economic circumstances, with many now operating on reduced revenue streams. Losses in funding have not only limited organisations’ ability to respond to the pandemic, but have also reduced their capacity to continue pre-pandemic activities.



Private sector institutions

Other participants indicated the involvement of private sector institutions and below is what they had to say:



“Private businesses such as Boxers have been donating food to the Traditional Authorities to distribute to those most in need in the communities” (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

So we realised that after everything else the numbers spike so we had to make sure that we monitor the funerals. It was not an easy task because there were only 12 of us but we decided that we can't do this on our own but capacitate the people that have a direct role in reducing the numbers at the funerals. For instance, if we spoke to the funeral parlour and said the deceased family member must be buried in the next few days, we cannot have the body sleeping over, we had to communicate all those things to the funeral parlour so that when the funeral parlours actually service their people they also ask them. That also assisted us a lot” ” (FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM).

Community public participation from the WMMLM stated that government institutions were also involved in responding to the COVID-19 crisis. The declaration of the National State of Disaster on 15 March 2020 empowered government to take the measures that prevented many more people from becoming severely ill and saved countless lives. Such measures were necessary not only to respond to the devastating effects of the pandemic on human health and this is what some of the participants from the WMMLM had to say:

“The government also provided free vaccines for all citizens” (FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM).

“SAPS and the traffic department were always there to provide with community education when we notices people not come to town during level 5” (FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM).

Traditional leaders

Findings obtained in the study also revealed the significant role played by traditional leaders at the WMMLM. Below is what some of the participants had to say:

“And the involvement of traditional leaders because there were issues of circumcision schools which wanted to run as normal, there were issues of imigidilimicimbi (cultural events) but we had to get closer to the traditional authorities and say that these activities that happen in your spaces and this is what is happening now and we really allowed them to assist us with these issues and also at the clinics. We would take advantage of everything because people would go to the clinics but let the people from the clinics assist us in communicating the information” (Disaster Management Unit, WMMLM).

A traditional leader also added:

“As traditional leaders, we provided support by encouraging people to go to the clinic or hospital to get vaccinated” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

Another traditional leader had this to say:

“Our structure includes chiefs, headmen and sub-headman, so the headman would instruct others to mobilise people according to their areas and inform them that they are required to get vaccinated at hospitals, tell them to register and get vaccinated in order to prevent themselves from contracting this deadly disease” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

Modes of distributing COVID-19-related information

The study’s findings revealed that there were seven modes (funerals, local communication channels, loud hailers, print media, radio,

television, and WhatsApp) of distributing COVID-19 information across communities in the two municipalities. This finding demonstrates that modern and traditional models such as local communication channels were used to communicate information about COVID-19. According to a participant in the FGD with traditional leaders in Matatiele, funerals were used to educate community members about COVID-19 regulations, including avoidance of larger gatherings, handwashing, and the importance of protecting “*their loved ones by always adhering to the regulations*” because “*COVID-19 does not choose age*” (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele). One participant in the FGD with traditional leaders noted that communities are happy to pass information to their neighbours when asked to do so. This was an important platform used to communicate COVID-19 messages. Another participant in the same FGD reported that the local structures such as chiefs, headmen and sub-headman in the communities helped pass COVID-19-related communication. According to the participant;

“The headman would instruct others to mobilise people according to their areas and inform them that they are required to get vaccinated at hospitals, tell them to register and get vaccinated in order to prevent themselves from contracting this deadly disease”

(FGD, Traditional Leaders, Matatiele). For a participant in the FGD with SaveAct in the Matatiele, “*The traditional method still works*” was deployed effectively in communicating COVID-19-related information (FGD, SaveAct, Matatiele).



One participant from the Disaster Management Unit in WMMLM and another from the FGD with the Communication and Public Participation Unit in WMMLM reported using loud hailers as a medium for disseminating and enforcing COVID-19 messages. The participant in the Disaster Management Unit in WMMLM FGD reported that the Municipality “*would go to villages and do loud hailing enforcing some regulations*.” According to the participant, community members found it difficult to adhere to the COVID-19 regulations because “*because the pandemic affected their livelihoods and they found it difficult at home not knowing where their next meal would come from*” and moving around in search of livelihood opportunities was unavoidable. Another participant reported that the loud hailers are used to inform communities concerning COVID-19 and how the communities should behave.

Radio and TV were the most cited medium of communicating COVID-19-related information. Most individuals interviewed for the study reported receiving COVID-19 communication via TV or the radio. According to a participant in the FGD with the Disaster Management Unit in WMMLM, the municipality,

“We used local radio stations for disseminating information”. For a participant in the FGD with the CBO in Matatiele, the group was not taught how to respond to the pandemic. The participant noted that “through exposure on TV, we realised that we can also educate people” (FGD, Home-Based Care, Matatiele).

The print media was also reported as a common communication platform for relaying information about COVID-19 to local communities. A participant in the IDP FGD reported using the municipality’s “*website to inform people about things that they must not do in terms of COVID-19 regulations*” (FGD, Communication and Public Participation, WMMLM). According to the participant, the municipality’s website was a convenient mode of communicating COVID-19 information because the lockdown regulations prevented community gathering. The participant further reported that although the municipality used newsletters to communicate COVID-19 information, this was not ideal since the newsletter was only published every fortnight. By the time the publication became available, the information might have been outdated because of the fast pace of changes associated with COVID-19. Government social media platforms were used to communicate COVID-19 information (Participants 1, 2, 5 & 6). Relatedly, a participant reported receiving COVID-19-related information via WhatsApp. According to the participants, they used the WhatsApp group of their savings group to inform their members about COVID-19 (FGD, SaveAct, Matatiele).

Support received during the COVID-19 pandemic

Participants in the study reported receiving various kinds of support to aid them in coping with the impacts of the pandemic. The support received includes food parcels, government grants, inputs and training, sanitary towels, sanitisers, and water.

A participant reported coordinating with stakeholders, including the private sector, to assist with food parcels because that kind of support was not a core mandate of the unit (FGD, Disaster Management Unit, WMMLM). According to the participant, coordination with the private sector resulted in providing food parcels to community members in need. In contrast, the municipality provided food parcels to communities through its response budget. A participant from the Communication and Public Participation WMMLM corroborated this point, noting that there was coordination between the local municipality, businesses and other government departments, including Social Development, to provide food parcels to communities.

Traditional leaders also reported collaborating with the private sector to source food parcels for needy community members during the COVID-19 lockdown. A participant in the FGD with the traditional leaders reported approaching Boxer, a national grocery chain store, to assist with food parcels. According to the participant, they identified community members most affected by the pandemic and, with the help of NGOs such as World Vision, delivered food parcels to these individuals, including those in remote locations. Another participant in the same FGD reported that an NGO in the village donated food parcels to one hundred and fifty people. The participant also pointed out that the *“the House of Traditional leaders gave us R700 to give to five deserving people”* (FGD, Traditional Leaders, WMMLM). According to Participant 13, the food parcels provided to

households *“brought a lot of happiness and relief to people”*.

Government grant was another reported form of support provided to individuals. One of these was the introduction of a grant of R350 to unemployed individuals (in addition to other existing grants they might have been receiving) to cope with the impacts of the pandemic (Participant 9). However, while some participants reported receiving the COVID-19 relief grant, others, such as Participant 2, reported not receiving the grant. The participant, however, noted that some of his grand children did receive the grant.

Some participants reported providing inputs to their members to enable them to cope with the pandemic's impacts. SaveAct, for instance, reported creating *“a seedling distribution programme to support”* members of the saving group. Relatedly, a participant in the FGD with traditional leaders in Matatiele reported that The Department of Agriculture *“gave people R2,000 worth of vouchers to buy crops”*.

Some participants reported receiving personal protection equipment and other sanitary products. According to a participant in the FGD with Communication and Public Participation WMMLM, the municipality provided PPEs such as masks and sanitisers. The same participant reported that *“NGOs, especially Melo, would donate masks, sanitisers”*. A participant in the FGD with traditional leaders in Matatiele reported that although they received PPEs from the government, what they received was quite little. Another participant reported on the



limited supply of PPE, noting that what the Department of Social Development supplied was insufficient. According to the participant, community members resorted to mixing sunlight dishwashing liquid with water to make their hand sanitisers (FGD, Home-Based Care, WMMLM).

Water was a commonly reported support received by the communities. As per the health guideline provided by the government, frequent handwashing was a recommended COVID-19 prevention measure. However, the two municipalities where these studies were conducted are both characterised by water scarcity. Most participants reported that their communities had problems accessing clean water before the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants reported being provided with water in the wake of the pandemic. One participant said, *“Things are better now because the government has finally provided us with tap water”* (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM). According to the participant, water tanks were provided after the intervention of the local chiefs.

Similarly, a participant in the FGD with ward councillors in WMMLM reported that the Amatola water board provided water to communities during the hard lockdown. A councillor in the FGD with Ward councillors in – WMMLM reported that they supply water tanks at events such as funerals to help communities maintain hygiene protocols. Unlike most participants who reported being provided with water tanks, one participant reported that the community

was provided with water pipes. The participant further reported that the government was very responsive in repairing damages to the pipes (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

Some participants reported that although water was provided in their villages, it did not cover the entire village. For instance, a participant in the FGD discussion with traditional leaders in WMMLM noted that there were reported cases of empty water tanks supplied by the government. The same was concurred by another participant in the same FGD adding:

The water tanks provided have caused tension in the village (FGD, Traditional leaders WMMLM).

Water was only provided during the strictest lockdown level for a participant in the FGD with Ward councillors in WMMLM. The participant noted that *“after the President spoke about relaxing regulations to level 2 they stopped”*, referring to the provision of water. This was supported by other participants in the same FGD, group.

Although the communities are water-constrained and some relief was brought to the communities as part of government response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were reported vandalism and theft of water infrastructure provided by the government (FGD, SaveAct Matatiele). Another participant occurred citing the example of generators being either stolen or specific parts being stolen, thus making them non-functional (FGD, Ward councillors, WMMLM).

For participant 6, the support received from governments was very helpful in dealing with the impacts of the pandemic. The participant reported, “Such government movements were a great help as they assisted many families. With the social relief grant, people could purchase toiletries and fulfil other needs.” For a participant in the FGD with Ward councillors in WMMLM, responding to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing learning process. The participant reported that the government initially supplied PPEs, but later gave instructions that they should purchase these themselves and then to be refunded afterwards by the government. A participant in the same FGD attributed the drop in water provision to the fact that the national government ended its subsidy programme, thus leaving the responsibility to District municipalities. For a participant in the FGD with Disaster Management Unit from WMMLM, the grant received from the National Treasury enabled the municipality to respond to the pandemic. According to the participant, the municipality used the grant to procure tanks, provide water, and supply sanitisers and masks.

Although several participants reported receiving support to cope with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, a participant in the FGD with the traditional leaders in WMMLM reported not receiving any support. The participant noted that he supported himself, including hiring cars to service the community.

Organisations from whom support was received

Participants in the study reported receiving support from the government, civil society organisations and the private sector. The support from the government includes water, personal protection and other sanitary products, food parcels, business funding, and social grants. The support reported in this study came from national, provincial, district and local municipalities and government departments, including the Department of Agriculture and Social Development.

Support received from the private sector, and civil society organisations was the mainly in the form of food parcels, water, capacity building, education, and training. According to a participant in the FGD with LIMA, the organisation provides various support, including access to water and, hygiene education to and educating the community on hygiene practices to ensure that they “maintain a high level of hygiene” (FGD, LIMA, Matatiele). The participant reported that their training was based on resources developed by Conservation South Africa. The resources they use include “handbooks for learners at school”, which contain “important images that can be shared over WhatsApp” and a “simple kit to improve sanitation in the area” (FGD, LIMA, Matatiele). Participant 15, a member of a stokvel, reported that the group supported them with food parcels during the lockdown.



A participant in the FGD with Traditional leaders in Matatiele reported that the “taxi association has provided coupons to use while travelling in taxis.” Another participant in the same FGD confirmed this, noting that the “taxi association provided coupons so that they don’t have to pay taxi fare when we use the coupons from the taxi association means we never travel to provide services to the community” (FGD, Traditional Leaders, Matatiele). However, the coupons are not valid on all routes, as reported by the participant in the following excerpt:

“When one travels to another town, you cannot use the coupon, and since you feel sorry for the bereaved family, you use your own money to assist them with the death certificate, and then take that responsibility of paying for your own transport in an effort to help the bereaved family because you know that if you don’t go to Home Affairs, they would not get the death certificate. You also realise that the family needs this death certificate in order to claim monies from the insurance companies” (FGD, Traditional leaders, Matatiele).

Types of capital used to cushion impacts of the pandemic

Participants in the study reported using three types of capital to cushion the impacts of the pandemic: financial, natural, and social capital. Reliance on financial capital was reported in only the FGD with Ecochar and by participant 2. According to a participant in the FGD with Ecochar, “the company makes money through selling charcoal” and the sale of other ecosystem services recovered from clearing around indigenous forest” (FGD, Ecochar). Another participant in the same FGD reported that the market for charcoal slowed down because of lockdown restrictions to stem the spread of the pandemic. As a result, their charcoal was piling up in the storage, and employees were not being paid. The participant reported that three employees left the organisation because of a lack of income despite working daily (FGD, Ecochar).

Unlike the participants in the interview with Ecochar, participant 2 reported that his earnings were not affected by COVID-19 because he received a social grant and money from his family. The participant reported;





+

**Church Funds**

“We have an older granny, my mother-in-law. She was earning elderly grants even before COVID-19, and I have three grandchildren earning social grants. These grandchildren are staying with my mother-in-law and me. I also registered for my old-age grant last year, so all in all, we are living with social grants in this family, and we were not affected by COVID-19” (Participant 2).

Participants in two focus groups (FGD with chiefs in Matatiele and FGD with Ecochar) resorted to natural capital to cope with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a participant in the FGD with traditional leaders in Matatiele, “One of the positive things that happened is that a lot of people started planting vegetables in home gardens, most of which had been abandoned in favour of buying all food items in town”. According to the participant, the pandemic drove positive eating habits in local communities. For a participant in the FGD with Ecochar, the group resorted to clearing indigenous forests of alien invasives, and through this, they received income. They also processed the cleared alien invasives into charcoal for sale.

Some participants reported relying on social resources in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. These include churches and saving groups such as stokvels. For participant 1, the church was instrumental in providing spiritual support during the difficult lockdown times. According to the participant, this was essential since life changed because of the pandemic, and group activities were impossible. According to participant 17, the stokvel was helpful in the provision of food parcels for a period of the pandemic.

Recommendations for improving the response to COVID-19

Participants in this study provided nine recommendations for improving the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the recommendations was for traditional leaders to be compensated for their services to the communities. The requested compensation included the provision of financial resources. Another participant in the same FGD reported, “In all this work that we have done during COVID-19, we have not received any money like other



departments; nothing. We were forgotten just like that. That is one of the issues of concern for us” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM). Relatedly, a participant in the same focus group reported that they did not receive a bonus for the additional tasks performed for their communities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A participant in the FGD with the Home-Based Care CBO supported the preceding, asking for increased compensation. The participant reported, “When I go to work, I pay R100 for transport per day”. The high cost of transportation implied that very little was left to sustain the participant (FGD, Home-Based Care, WMMLM).

Some participants recommended the provision of additional resources as a means of improving the COVID-19 response. A participant noted that traditional leadership was understaffed and under-resourced (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM). As noted by one participant, *“It’s also difficult to be a leader who does not even have a car while your subjects have cars. That also makes chiefs to be less respected in some respects. We can’t reach places and areas that most people can reach”*. To address this shortage, a participant noted they *“improvise in order for us to go where we want to go”* (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM). Another participant in the FGD with the Home-Based Care CBO reported that the CBO *“would also like to be provided with a car which will assist CBOs to make it easy for caregivers to assist communities in circumstances where they need to be transported. We are exposed to experiencing the dire poverty that some people live in”*. The participant reported that they had

organised transportation for some community members in some instances, but this raises additional challenges since other community members would also like to be supported. The most urgent need, according to the participant, was being able to transport community members to the Department of Home Affairs to apply for documents (FGD, Home Based-Care, WMMLM). Another participant in the same FGD reported, *“That is why I said CBOs need their own vehicle. Sometimes when you get to these houses, people get very happy to see you and even give you their contact number with the hope that you will assist them when you know very well there is absolutely nothing that you can do for them”* (FGD, Home-Based Care, WMMLM).

For a participant, there was an imbalance in how traditional leader in the Eastern Cape were treated compared to those in KwaZulu Natal. The participant expressed this concern in the following excerpt:

As I have said that as chiefs, we are struggling, and since I have heard that you are some of the people that have been funded, we also ask for funding support for the kingdoms so that they can grow and develop. When we look at the Zulu palaces, they are well taken care of compared to the ones here in Eastern Cape. Even if I can take you to my palace, you would see how poor it is. Maybe if you can have a budget and visit us you would see what I am talking about. Maybe if we can get some money to build a structure where we can hold meetings because, as things stand, we sit outside a kraal and are

exposed to the harsh weather conditions. We love our people and would really like to assist them, but we can't since we don't have the resources to do so. It becomes difficult to even contribute when there is bereavement in a family (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

In response to the foregoing, another participant in the FGD with traditional leaders in WMMLM reported that traditional leaders lacked the resources needed to carry out their responsibilities. According to the participants, traditional leaders “need laptops because when we have to submit the information, we hire laptops”. The need for laptops was identified as critical because of the migration of several government services to online platforms in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other assistance needed by traditional leaders, according to the participant, include:

“...tables and chairs in our offices. Our building needs fencing, and we are exposed to everyone who is passing. And we need a garden because we can't tell people to eat vegetables while we don't even have a garden ourselves. We need that kind of assistance, uniform, name badges, and the like, things which will identify us as caregivers (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

For a participant in the FGD with the Home-Based Care CBO in WMMLM, the required resource is a home-based care kit. The participant reported that the lack of home-based care kits makes it impossible for them to help community members (FGD, Home-Based

Care, WMMLM). Participant 7 recommended the provision of school uniforms as a means of helping the community because most lost their livelihoods and could not afford uniforms for their children.

Participants in the FGD with traditional leader also requested that the chiefs should be given projects to implement in their communities. According to the participants, such projects will enable them to help their communities more than projects brought by local councillors. As one participant noted, “Some Councillors have huge projects in their yard while the chiefs have nothing because they only rely on this small amount that we receive” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM). According to a participant, being tasked with implementing projects in the communities will help them address the unemployment problem. The participant reported that the areas are characterised by a “high unemployment rate at the palaces as well which has a high number of dependants who rely on the chief for survival” (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

Some participants recommended that government provide social security to community members. One participant recommended that government extends credits to the citizens and provides entrepreneurial training. Participant 5, for instance, noted that, “As farmers, we would like to receive an allowance from the government so that we can grow in the agricultural sector. We would also appreciate it if the government could provide us with sanitisers. We are poor and unemployed; we cannot afford it” (Participant 5).



The provision of food relief was listed as a recommendation by participants in the FGD with the Home-Based Care group in WMMLM and participants 3 and 4. According to a participant in the Home-based Care FGD, it is important that they access food parcels so that they can help community members. The participant noted that the CBO *“would like to help poor people, and I think food parcels is one of the things that can assist”* (FGD, Home-Based Care, WMMLM). For participant 3, it is important that the government provide people with groceries since providing money to community members is often plagued by corruption. The participant noted that *“because of corruption, our people ended up not receiving anything”* (Participant 3).

Similarly, participant 4 reported that the government ought to provide food to community members to enable them to deal with the impacts of the pandemic. In addition to food parcels, it was recommended that government create employment for community members. In that regard, Participant 6 noted that *“when disaster strikes, the government must try and ensure that people are not restricted from working”*.

Two participants (Participants 7, 11 and 12) recommended providing personal protection equipment and easing the lockdown restrictions. The participants noted that easing lockdown restrictions will make life more bearable as communities recover from the impacts of the strict lockdown regulations. Relatedly, participant 11

recommended the provision of mobile clinics to aid with COVID-19 testing. Participants 7 and 18 recommended the provision of free vaccination to community members.

Participants in the FGD with Traditional Leaders recommended the streamlining of initiation schools as a means of enhancing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the participant, *“it was introduced that all initiation schools go to the mountain at the same date and time of the year, as to curb the fighting that would just start at the celebration of the entering of the boys into manhood school. This method has helped many community members not to be in one place at once which can lead to a super spread of the virus. The chief tried by all means to avoid congestion”* (FGD, Traditional Leaders, WMMLM).

Participants in the FGD with the Home-based Care group in WMMLM recommended that they be assisted in enabling them to support community members to access important documents (e.g., birth and death certificates and IDs). Getting proper documentation from Home Affairs was considered critical as it is essential in aiding grandparents to access important social support for children left behind by their young mothers and being cared for by grandparents.

Section Two

Quantitative Data Findings

The data analysis in this section quantifies the various facets of the pandemic's impact on Matatiele and Winnie Madikizela Mandela communities. It provides a statistical overview of employment shifts, food security issues, and other socio-economic impacts. With a blend of simple explanations accompanying each visual, readers can quickly grasp the breadth and depth of the challenges faced.



REPORT OF THE FINDINGS OF THE MUNICIPAL SURVEY ON UNDERSTANDING THE INTERPLAY AMONG VULNERABILITIES, LIVELIHOODS, AND INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

Methodology

The methodological approach to the study is mixed method. The quantitative part of the study involved questionnaire administration to a well-defined and representative sample (1065 households) of the population using the two municipalities (Mbizana and Matatiele) as case study. The instrument came in two local languages of the two municipalities.

Discrete outcome models such as generalised ordered logit and ordered logistics model were employed aside descriptive statistical methods used in describing the data and explain relationships among the variables of interest.

Findings

The following shows the results of the data analysis process. After the initial data treatment, we started data transformation which constituted the second phase of the exploratory data analysis. There are different categories of items formats as extracted from the KoboCloud which were open ended and close ended questions. The former were first analysed with some selected demographic information about the respondents.

Descriptive analysis

This section creates an overview of the findings from the study. It covers three themes ranging from drivers of vulnerability using the livelihood framework analysis; socio-economic livelihood

measures and the coping strategies of subjects before and during the pandemic.

Theme: Drivers of vulnerability

The drivers of vulnerability are encapsulated and explained from the view point of the sustainable livelihood framework which creates five distinct arms of livelihood resources and institutional support as they affect livelihood outcomes. This section further explores the influence of location and involvement in agricultural activities on the chances of being exposed to social vulnerability.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the respondents involving in agricultural activities, (60.67%) of the respondents were involved in farming activities and (39.33%) claimed the level of agricultural productivity in recent time has increased.

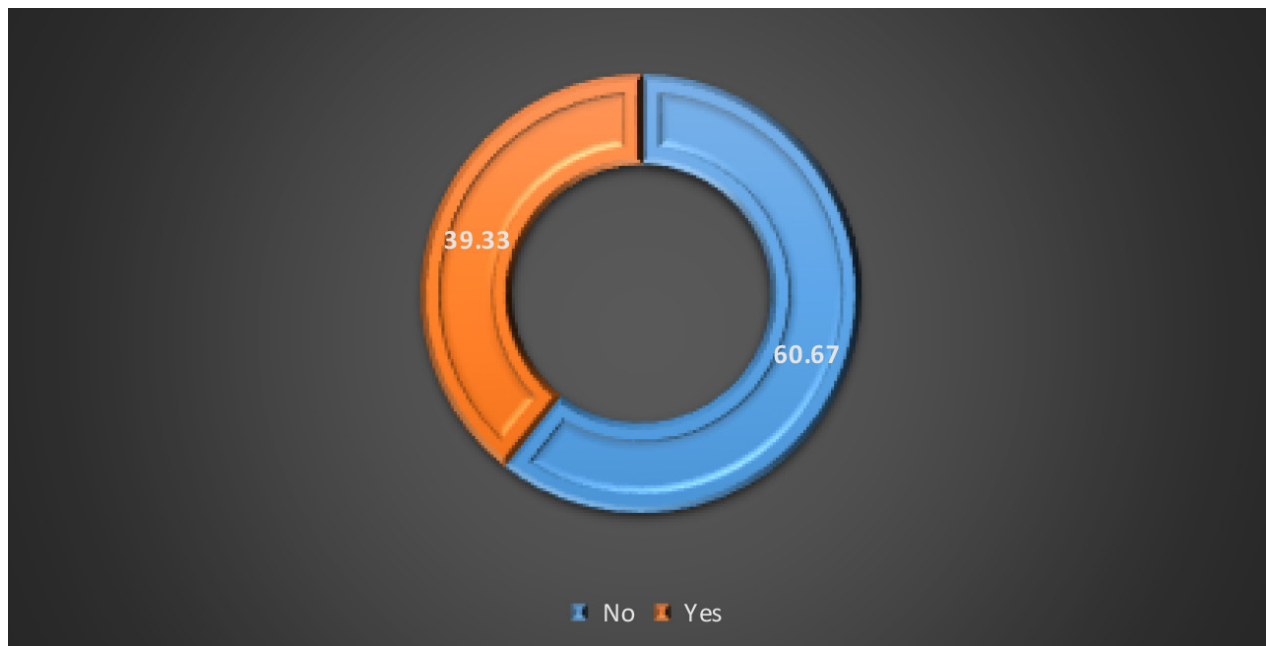


Figure 1: *Respondents involvement in farming activities*



Figure 2 depicts the level of agricultural productivity in the recent time. Majority (66.13%) of the respondents stated agricultural productivity has been low in the study area. This underscores the possible outcome of the pandemic, most especially during the lockdown.

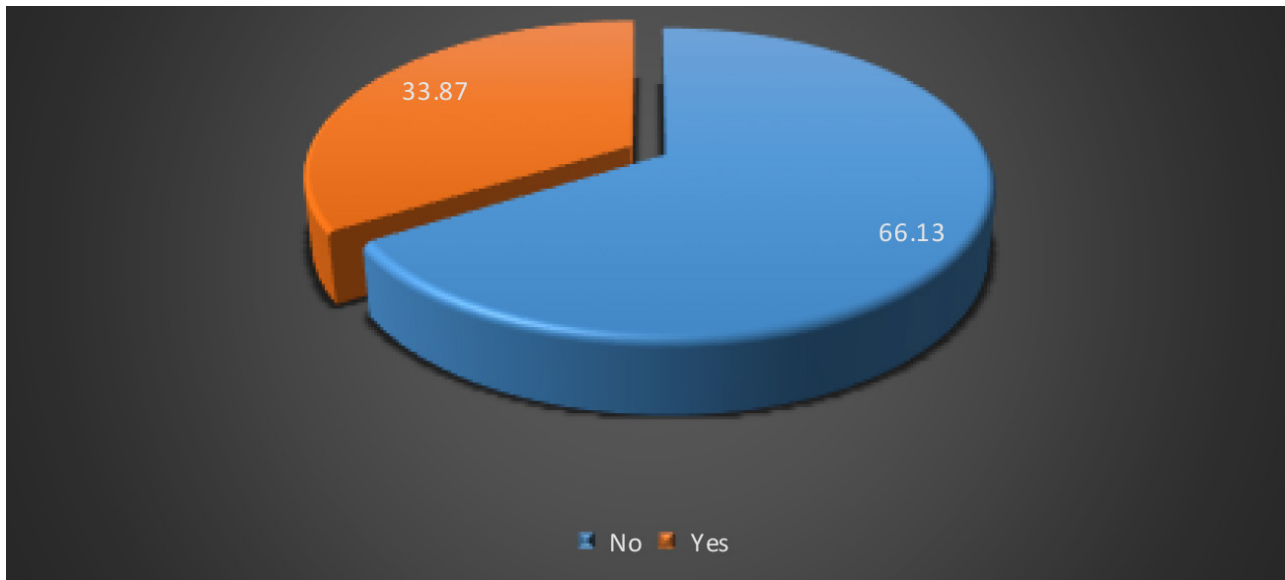


Figure 2: *Level of agricultural productivity in recent time*

Figure 3 depicts the series of farming system practised during the pandemic. The most common type of farming (Figure 2) practised by the respondents are livestock farming (35%) and subsistence farming (24%), followed by crop farming which is practised by one in five (20%) of the respondents. On the other hand, few of the respondents practise mixed farming (8%), commercial farming (8%) and gardening (5%).

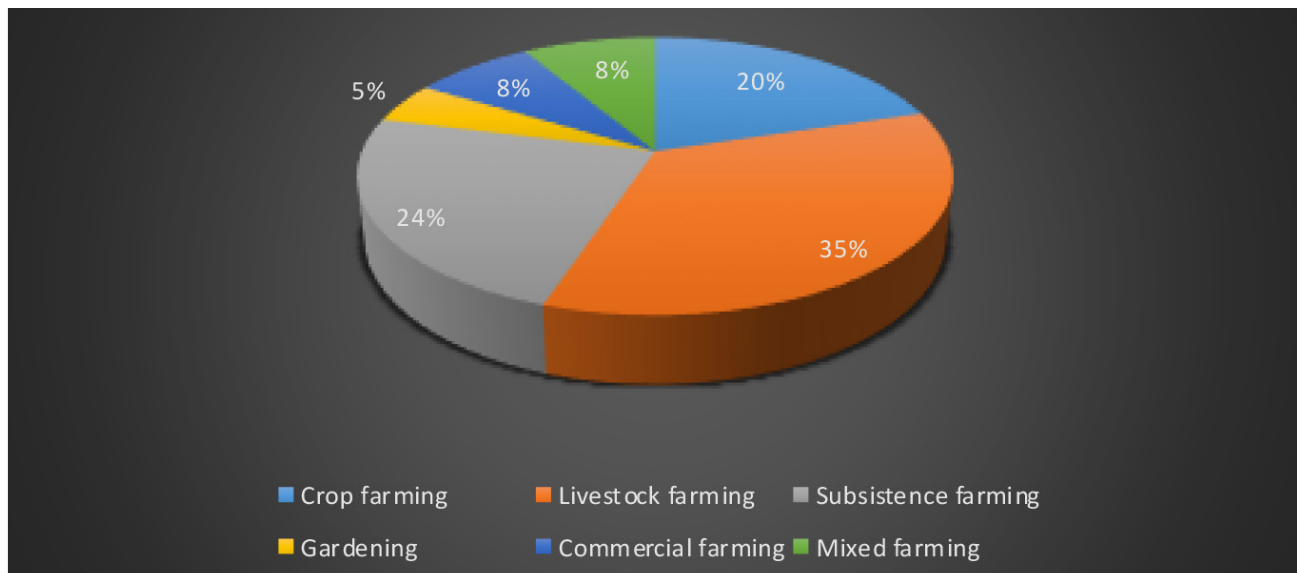


Figure 3: *Types of farming carried out by respondents*



The effect of the location residence increased the chance of exposure to the virus. By implication, an average respondent is affected by the pandemic. The finding presents an interesting contradiction to the notion that the people in the rural areas are more shielded from contraction of the virus as a result of lower exposure compared to the people at the urban centre.

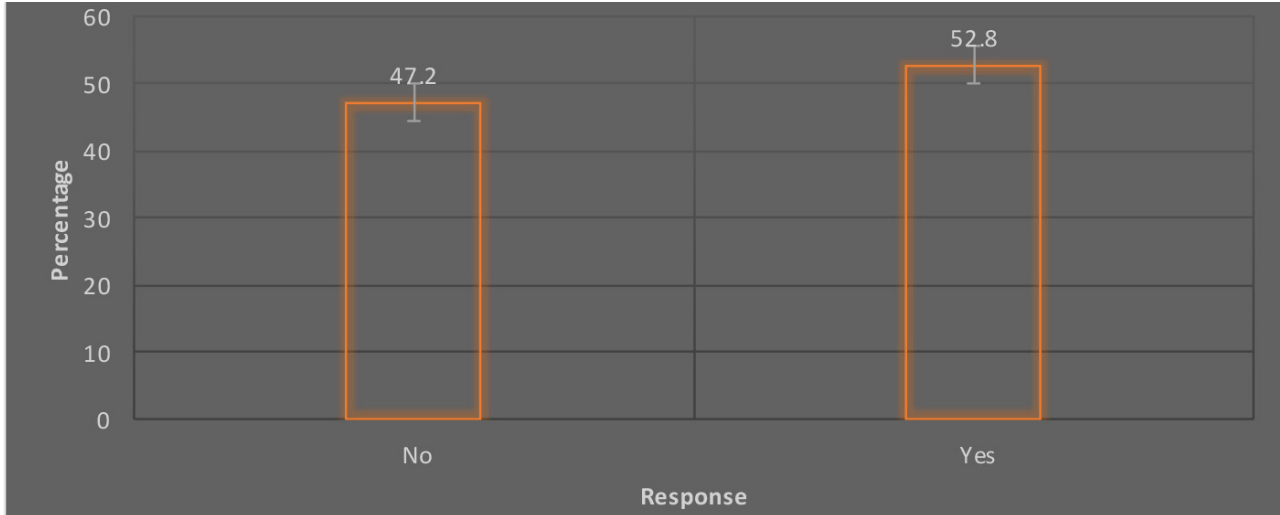


Figure 3: The effect of location on the chance of exposure to COVID-19

Social Resources

Figure 4 shows 53.51% of the respondents belonged to a particular social group. Specifically, 48.6% of the respondents belong to the church social group (Figure 5), 23.2% belong to the stokvel social group, 13.3% belong to one community or society, 10.7% of the respondents belong to burial/funeral group, few of the respondents belong to the financial group (1.6%), football group (1%) and less than 1% of the respondents belong to the food, truck/van association, Farming and gym group.

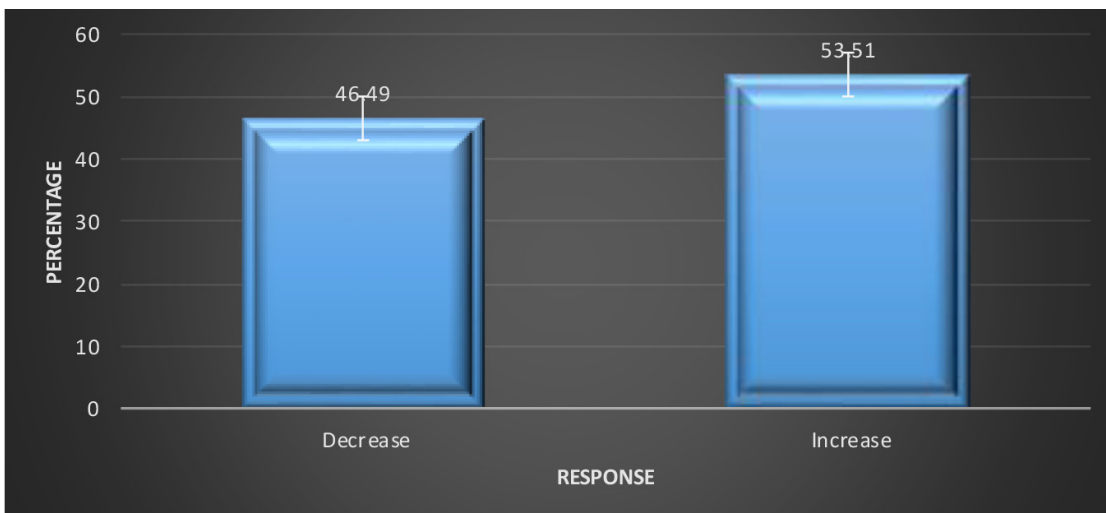


Figure 4: Involvement in social groups



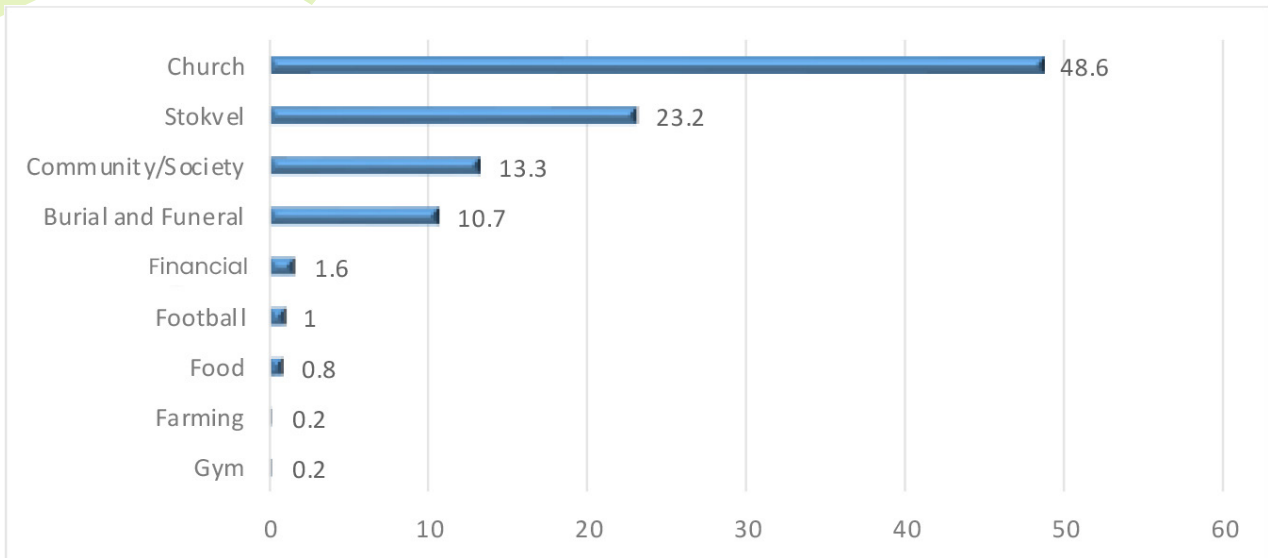


Figure 5: Respondents social group

Figure 6 shows majority (95.08%) of the respondents did not give support to the social groups they belong. This is not unlikely due to the heat of the pandemic socio-economically during the period. Usually, social groups are expected to create economic cushion to negative exogenous impact like the pandemic. Hence, there is always a disproportionate level of contribution among members. While majority (92.63%) also got support within the same period. Interestingly enough, more people gave more than they received in terms of support. The implication of this is more financial pressure on income. Perhaps, one of the reasons more people claimed the pandemic has income effect on them than those that claimed it had positive effect on their socio-economic wellbeing.

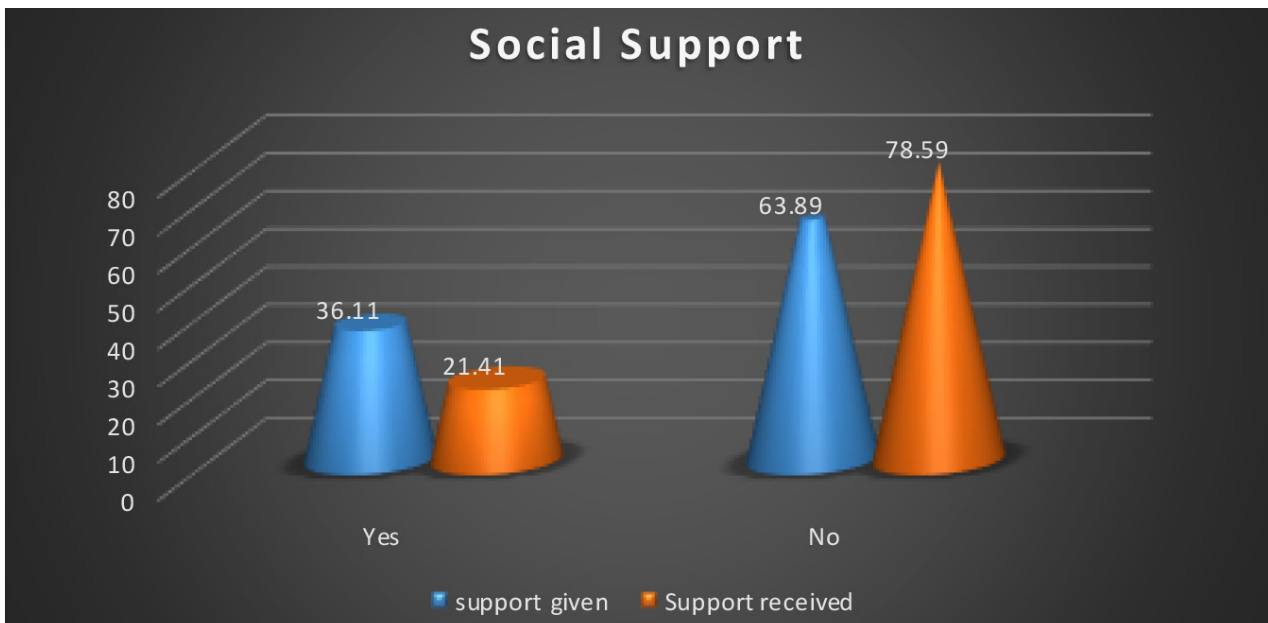


Figure 6: Support given and received by social groups before the pandemic



In respect to the groups supported financially or otherwise, most of the respondents supported the group they belonged to before the pandemic (Figure 8), barely more than one-third (34%) supported their social group financially, 19% gave food and groceries, 18% gave donations. Also, 15% of the respondents supported the social group with their active participation, while others gave advice and counseling (5%), spiritual support (4%) and very few (1%) did not offer any form of support.

Figure 7 shows if the contribution of the respondents continued during the lockdown. Majority (84.44%) of the respondents reported they did not continue their contribution during the lockdown.

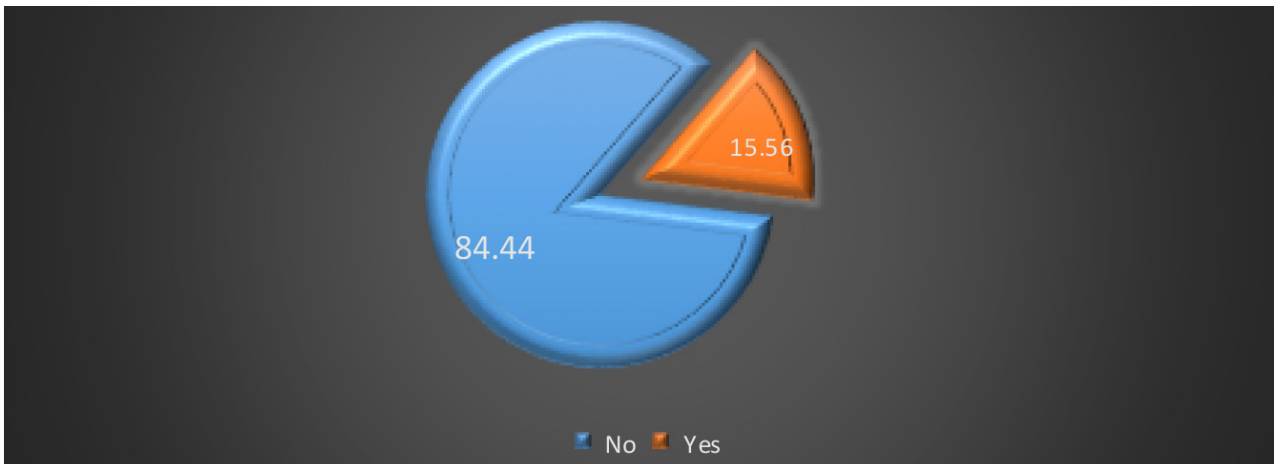


Figure 7: *If you made any contribution(s), did the contribution(s) continue during the lockdown*

In Figure 8, respondents were asked if they made contribution(s) to the major local institutions such as the local government and the traditional leaders in the area. It can be shown that the majority (95.08%) of the respondents did not make contribution to the local government. While majority (92.63%) also did not make contribution to the traditional leaders.

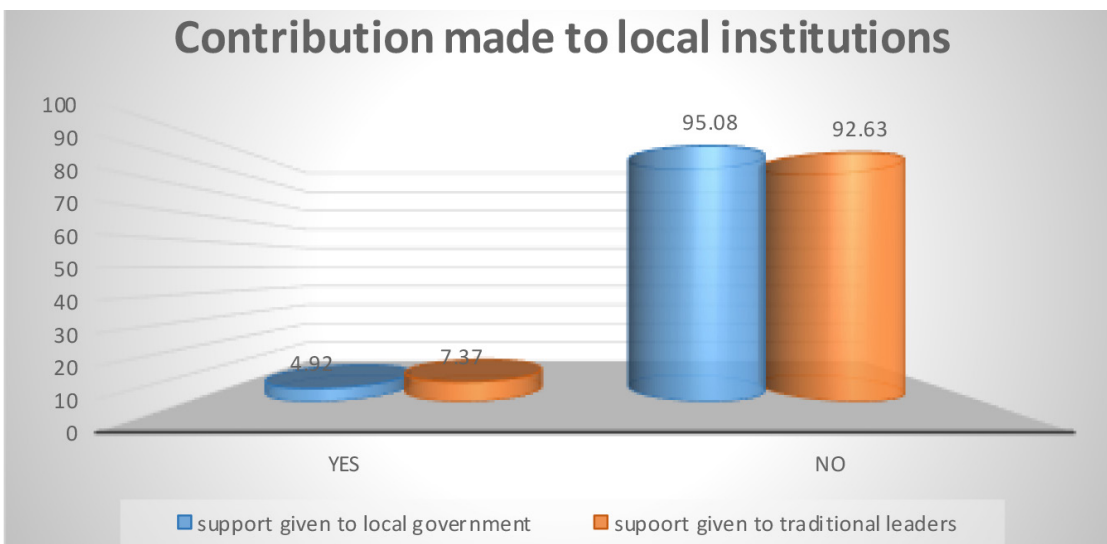


Figure 8: *Contributions made to local institutions*



The respondents that received various items from the social group belong to (Figure 9 and 10), received items such as food and groceries (27%), one quarter (25%) received financial support, 16% got donations, 9% received emotional support, advice, counsellings, and service from the social group. Others received spiritual support (4%) and employment (1%).

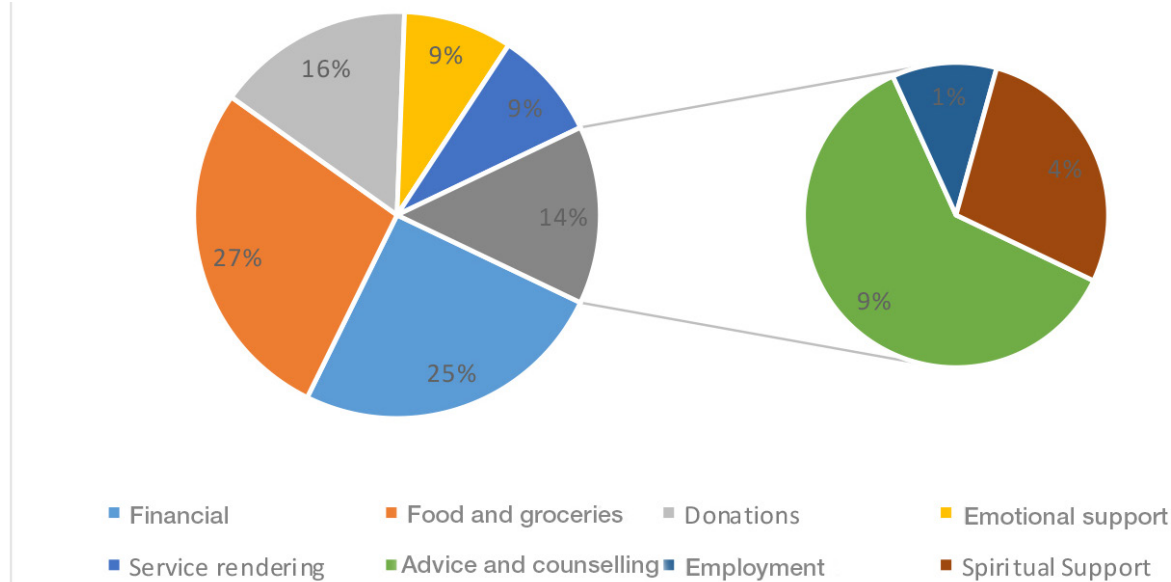


Figure 9: Type of support respondents received from the group(s) they belonged to before the pandemic

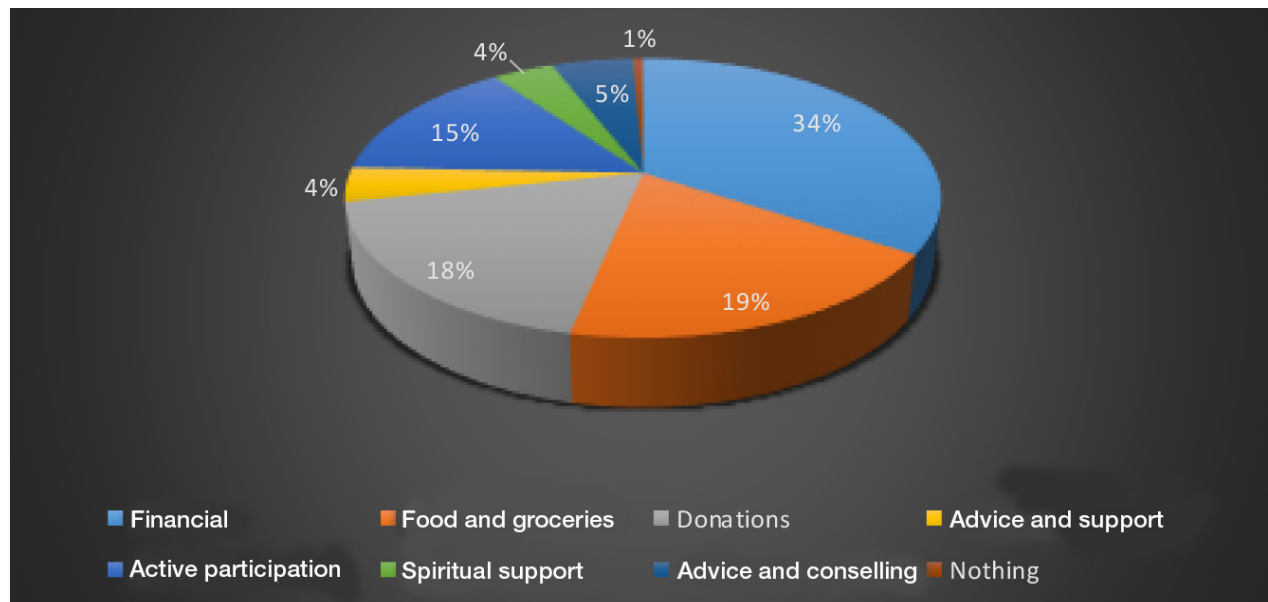


Figure 10: Type of support respondents gave to the group(s) they belonged to before the pandemic

Institutional support

Figure 11 shows generally, majority are not aware of the different intervention programmes available to cushion the effect of the pandemic.

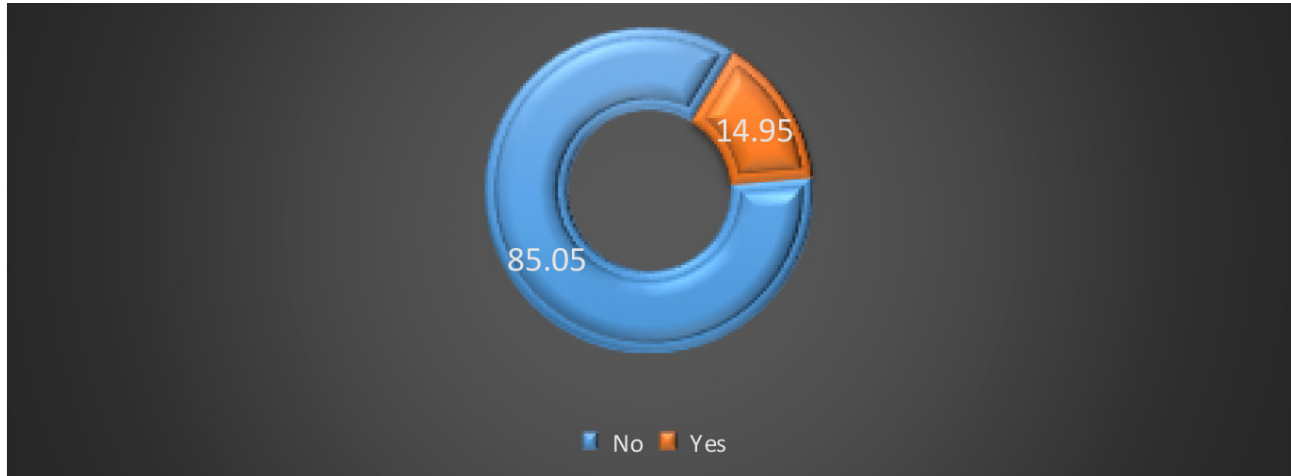


Figure 11: Are you aware of any programme that helped or affected the extent to which the pandemic affected people in the municipality

Specifically, programmes like Food parcel (29%), donations from NGOs (29%), COVID-19 protocols (11%), provision of social amenities by government (9%), grants (5%), vaccination (5%), awareness on COVID-19 (3%), COVID-19 kits (2%), employment (2%) and farming (1%) helped the extent to which the pandemic affected the respondents in their municipality while 1% were affected by funeral and job loss (Figure 12).

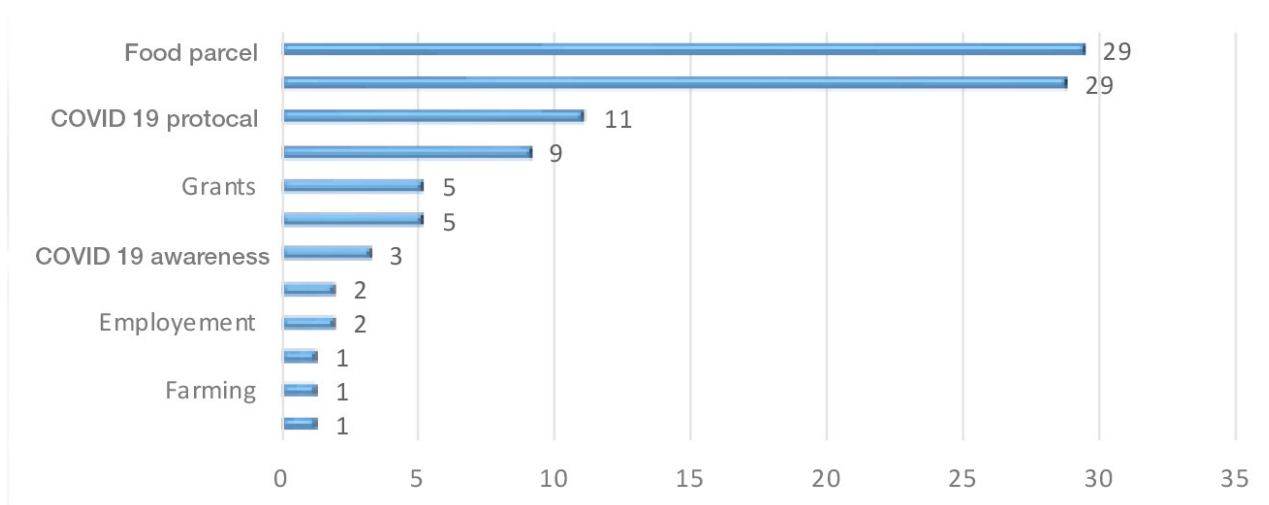


Figure 12: Programme that helped/affected the extent to which the pandemic affected respondents in their municipality



Figure 13 depicts the level of awareness of the people about the available institutional support from the government to ameliorate the effect of the pandemic. Surprisingly, three out of five respondents (60.02%) of the respondents reported they were not aware of the available government support during the pandemic.

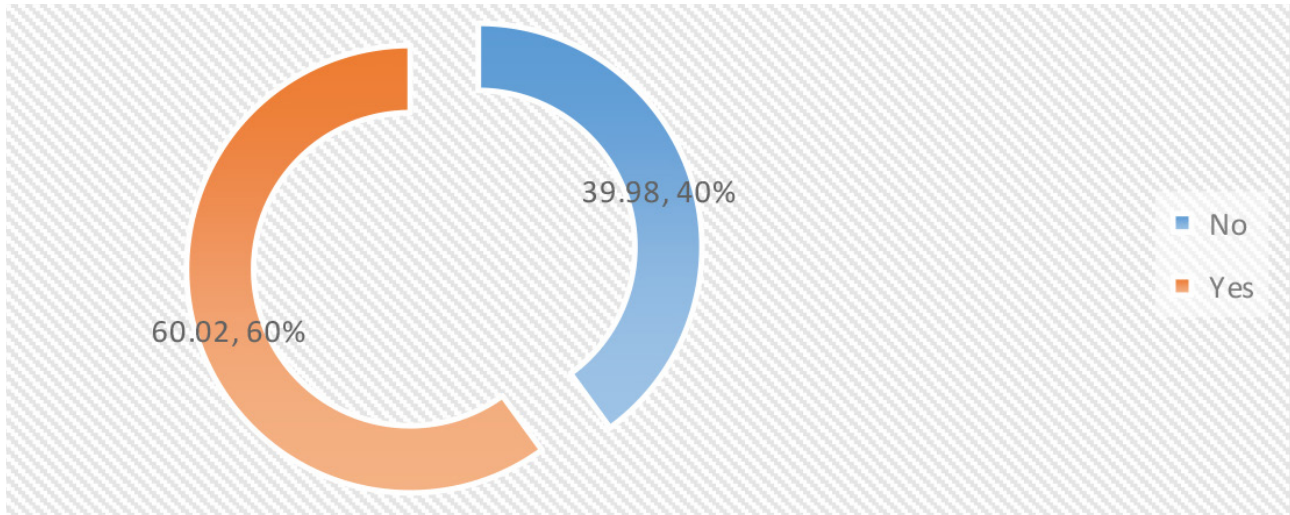


Figure 13: Individual awareness of government involvement in managing the pandemic

Figure 14 shows the series of government-oriented intervention programmes during the pandemic. The government action(s) include provision of grants (51.7%), provision of food and grocery (29%), free vaccine (13.4%) and COVID-19 protocols (5.9%).

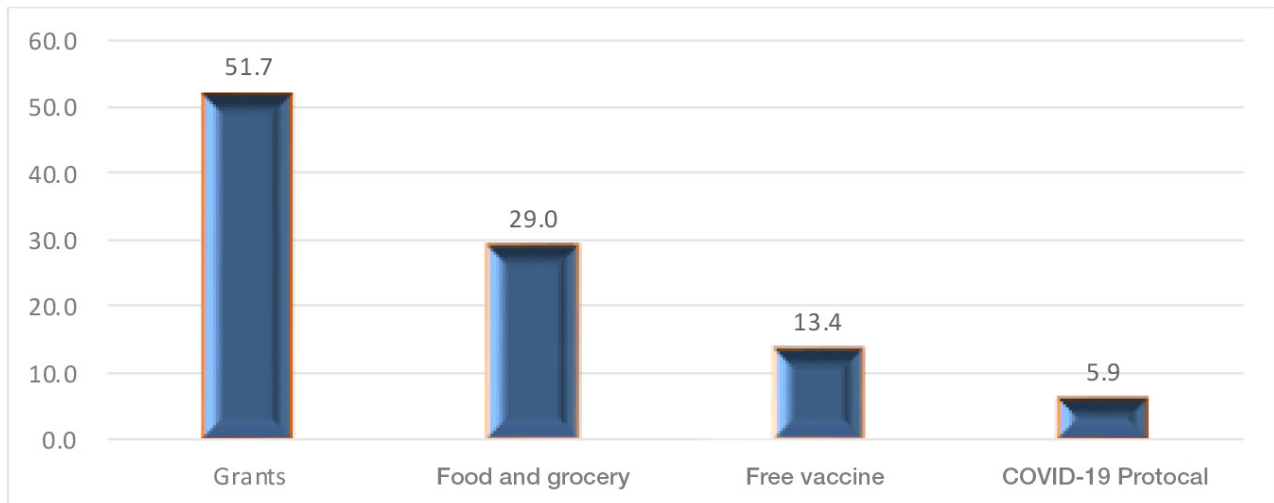


Figure 14: Action(s) that the government took to manage the pandemic and support livelihoods of respondents during the pandemic/lockdown



However, Figure 15 shows more than half (57%) of those that were aware of government intervention programmes reported the programmes did not translate into improved earnings.

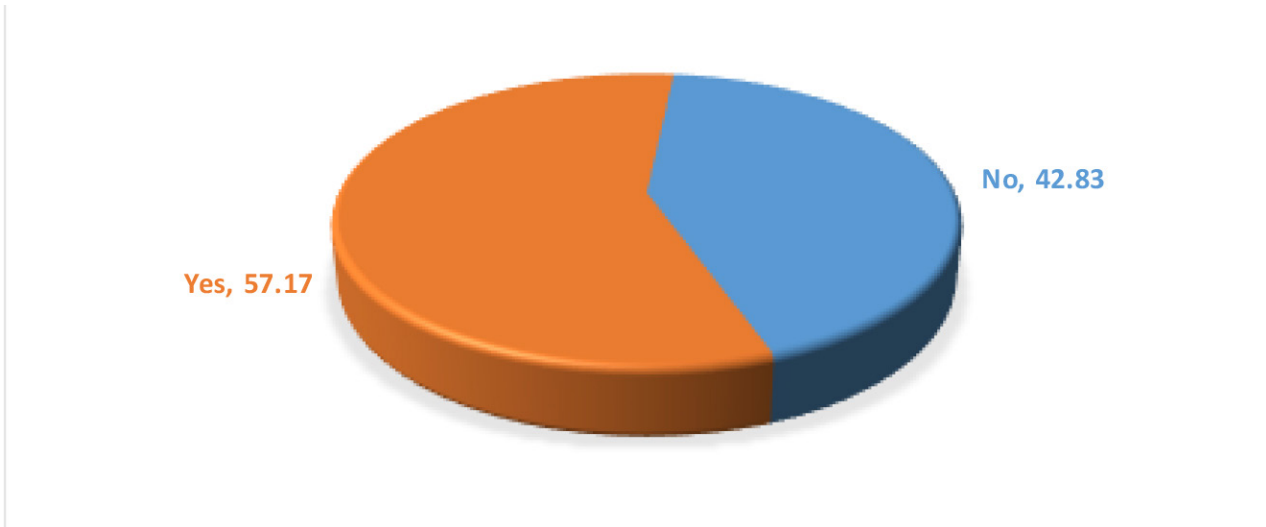


Figure 15: *Did the government’s action help improve you and your family’s means of earning a living?*

Similarly, majority of the respondents (75.5%) stated that they were not aware of the activities of NGOs, FBOs, etc. during the pandemic (Figure 16).

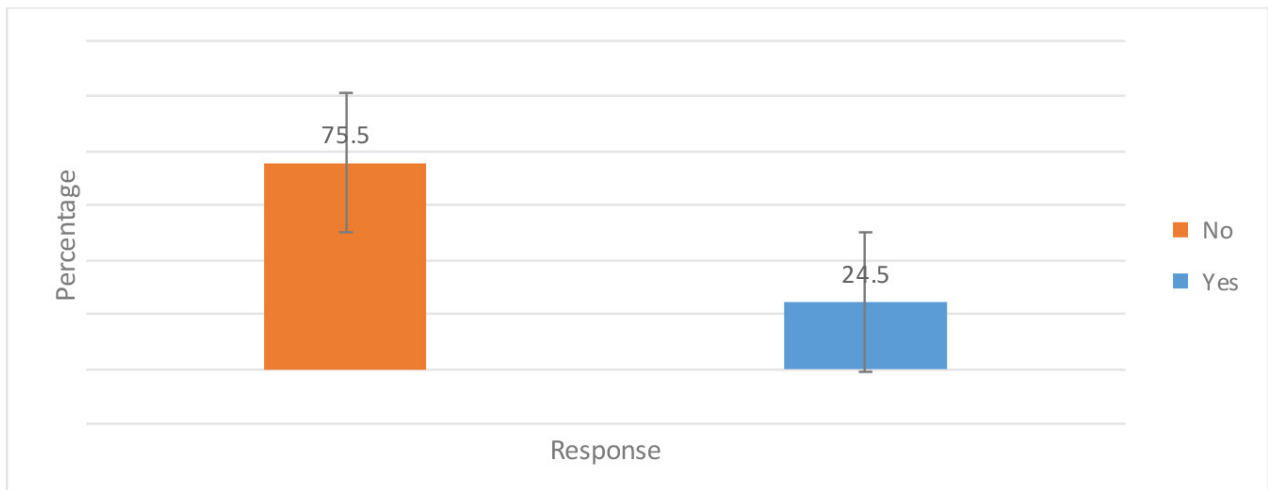


Figure 16: *Awareness of the activities of organisations such as NGOs, FBOs, etc. during the pandemic*

Figure 17 depicts less than half (43.72%) of the respondents and their households benefited from the organisations above.



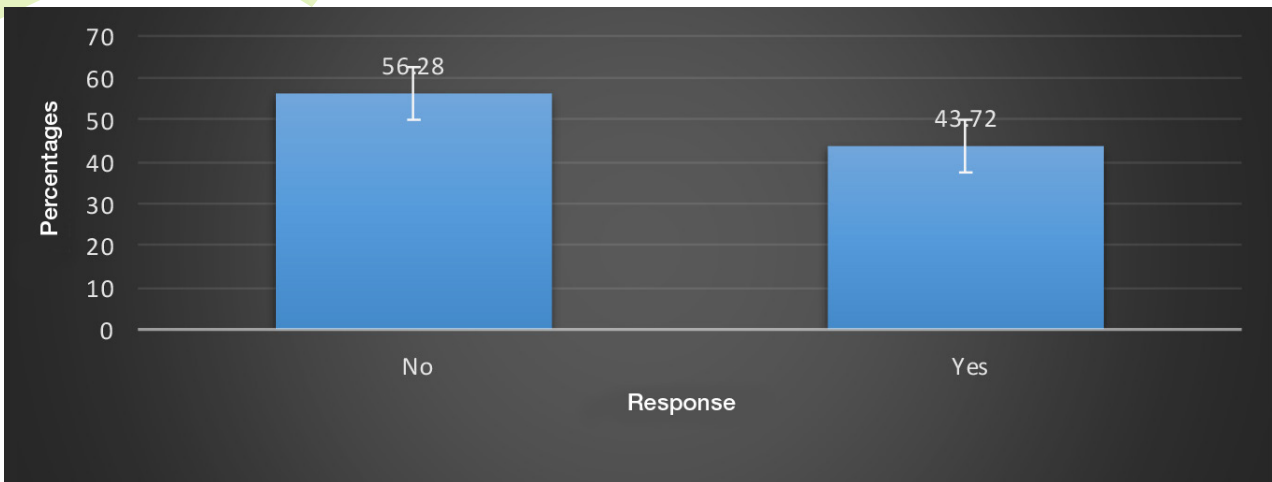


Figure 17: *Did you or your household benefit from them(organisations)?*

Whereas Figure 18 shows those that benefited from the activities of the organisations. Most of the respondents (32%) received food and grocery, personal protective equipment (17%), grants (11%), water (7%). Furthermore, an auction was set up that helped 6% of the respondents sell their livestock, 5% received employment, salary, farm tools and seeds, 4% were vaccinated, while 3% received COVID-19 safety kits, had their livestock treated and received advice and counseling. In addition, 2% of the respondents received COVID-19 awareness and donations.

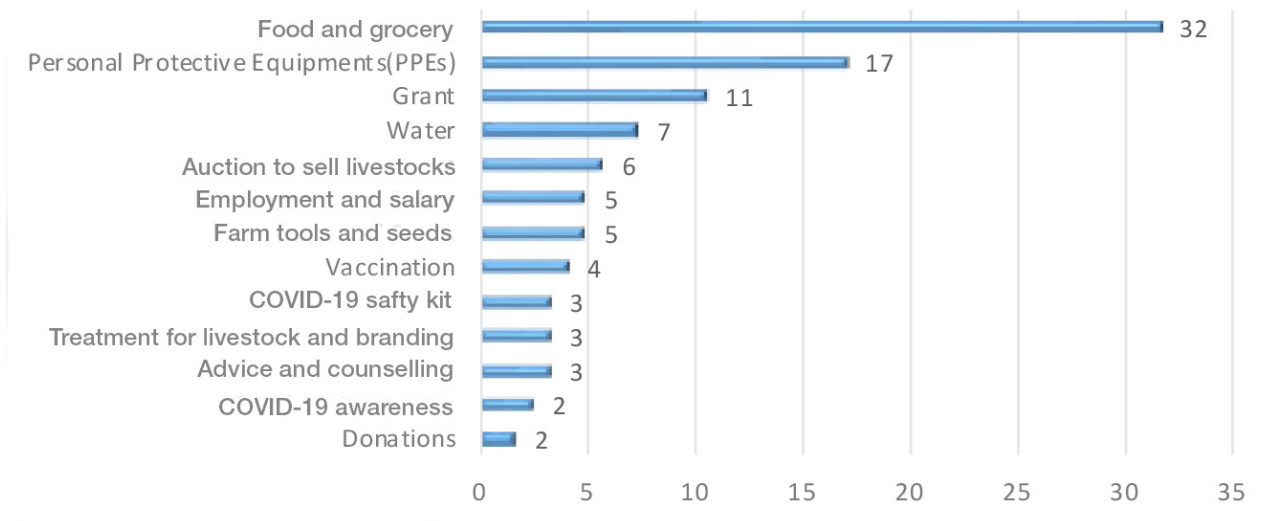


Figure 18: *Kind of benefit respondents received from activities of organisations*

Figure 19 shows majority (85.05%) reported they were not aware of any programme that helped cushioned the effect of the pandemic.

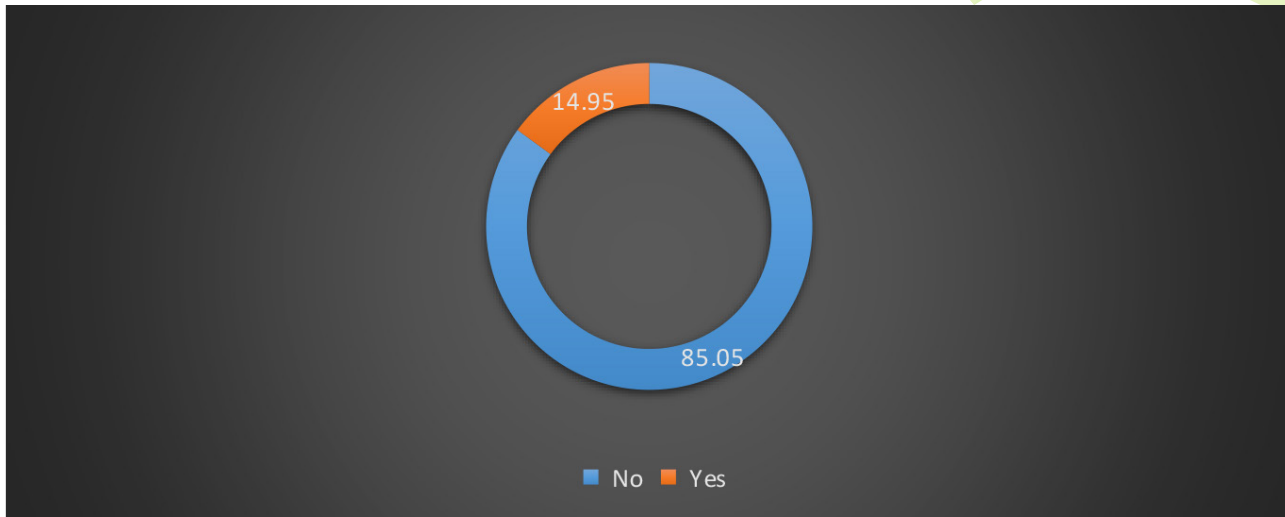


Figure 19: Are you aware of any programme that helped/or affected the extent to which the pandemic affected people in the municipality

However, Figure 16 shows those that were aware of the various programmes were able to identify various programmes which include; Food parcel (29%), donations from NGOs (29%), COVID-19 protocols (11%), provision of social amenities by government(9%), grants (5%), vaccination (5%), awareness on COVID-19 (3%), COVID-19 kits (2%), employment (2%) and farming (1%) helped the extent to which the pandemic affected the respondents in their municipality while 1% were affected by funeral and job loss (Figure 20).

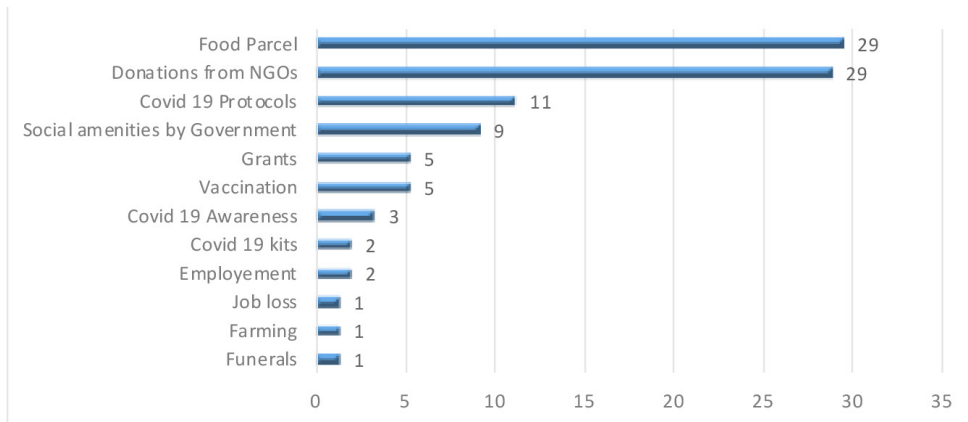


Figure 20: Programme that helped/affected the extent to which the pandemic affected respondents in their municipality

Figure 21 shows the distance of place of residence from the nearest clinic. The distance was measured in terms of walking and number of taxes taking to the clinic. By implication, 38.55% of the respondents walked to the clinic while 56.85% and 4.6% took one and two taxes before they reach the next clinic respectively. Overall, the clinic seemed accessible despite being located in the rural area.

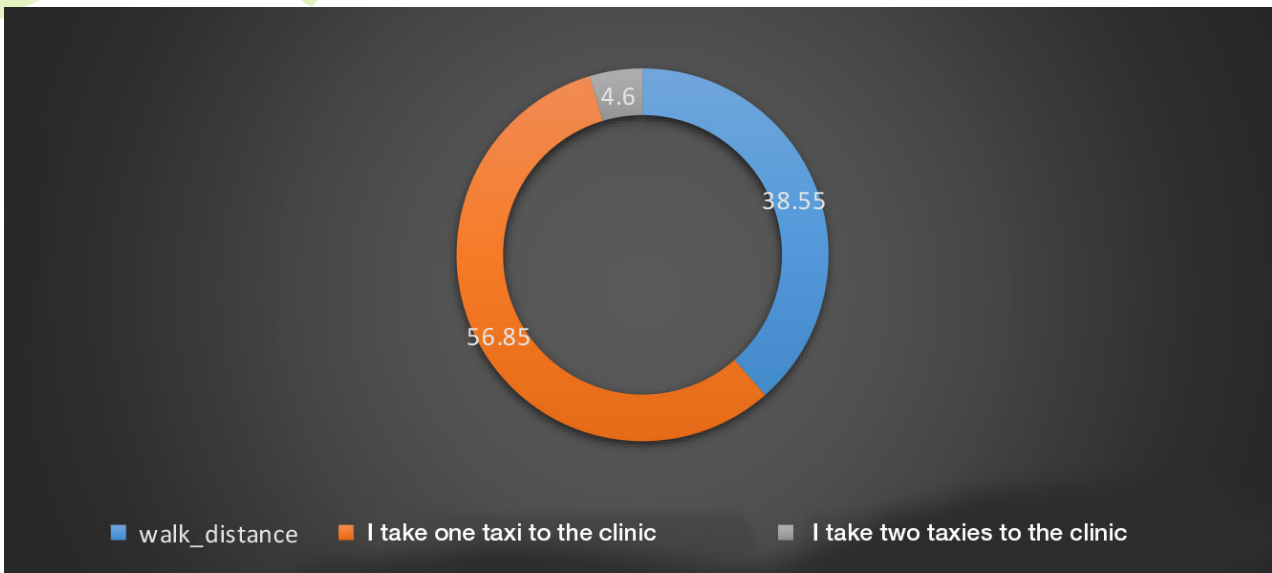


Figure 21: *How far is the nearest clinic?*

In Figure 22, respondents were asked how much they make per month (in Rand) before and during the lockdown from their occupation. It shows more than half (57.2%) of the respondents were earning above 750 Rand before the lockdown while this figure reduced (43.6%) during the lockdown. This shows that the pandemic has a considerable effect on the subjects. Whereas those earning below 750 Rand seemed to earn more during the pandemic. This is likely to be as a result of the kind of coping strategies adopted which might benefit the poorer citizens than the richer ones. To buttress this, some of the respondents showed they were not affected.

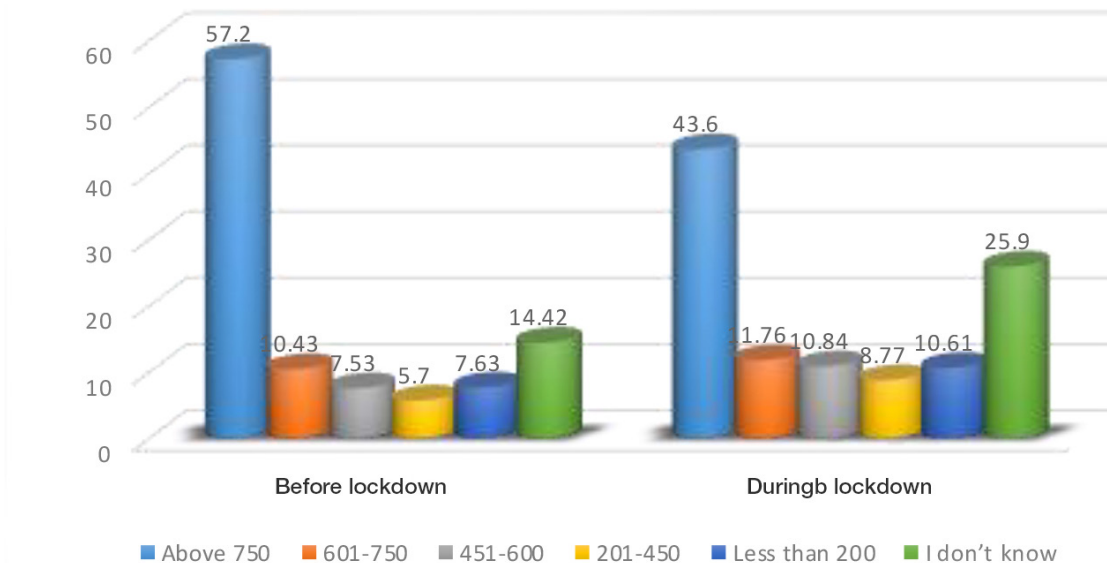


Figure 22: *Income before and during the lockdown*



In Figure 23, respondents were asked how much of their income was spent daily or weekly on basic needs (food, transportation) before and during the pandemic. It shows 14% of the respondents were spending between 81-100% of their income on daily or weekly basic needs (food, transportation) before the lockdown. Meanwhile, the number increased to 15.5% during the pandemic. This is a clear indication that during the pandemic, even when consumption was not necessarily increasing in itself, income stagnant or reduced income apparently would increase the proportion of income consumed. While 16.1% consumed 61-80-% of their income. This is followed progressively by the 17.0% of the respondents that spent 41-60% of their income on meeting basic needs before the lockdown. The initial consumption effect logic holds except for those consuming about half (41-60%) or below 20% of their income. The latter group case is understandable as the lockdown automatically brings about less mobility and reduced need to consume more on basics needs like clothing and transport.

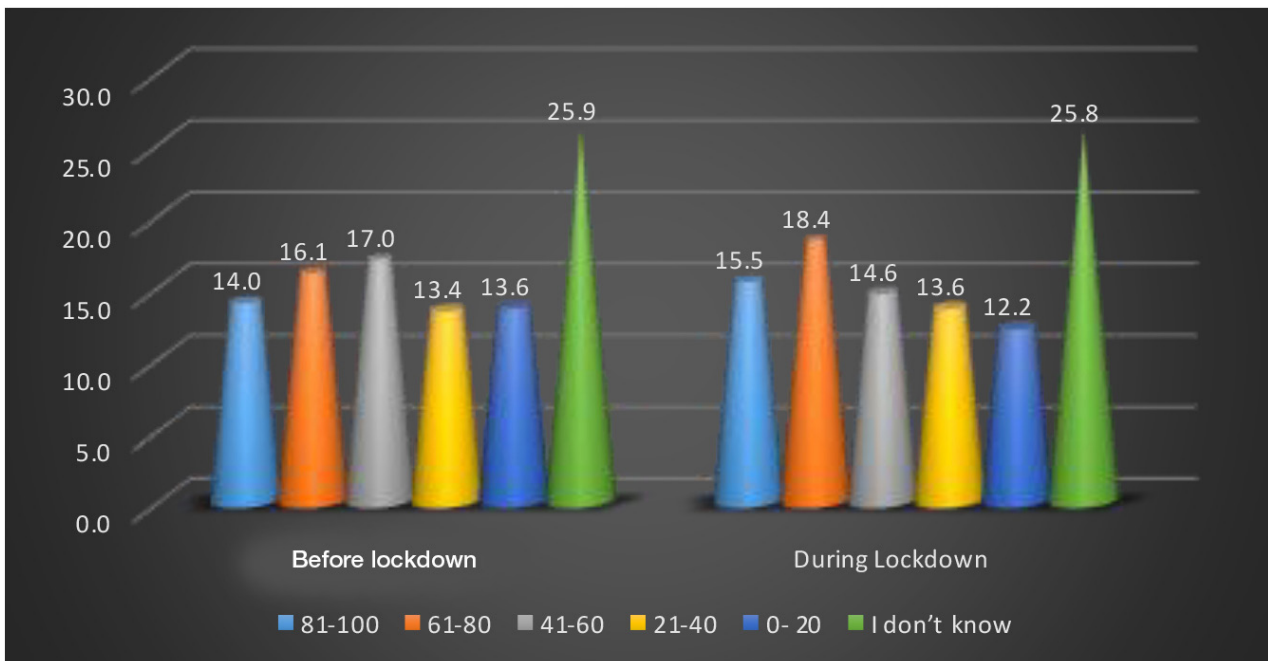


Figure 23: *Consumption before and during the lockdown*

In Figure 24, respondents were asked if the household was able to achieve three meals daily before the lockdown and after the lockdown. More people reported their household was able to achieve three meals daily more before lockdown than after lockdown (65.15% down to 52.47%). This is a further confirmation of the socio-economic effect of the pandemic.

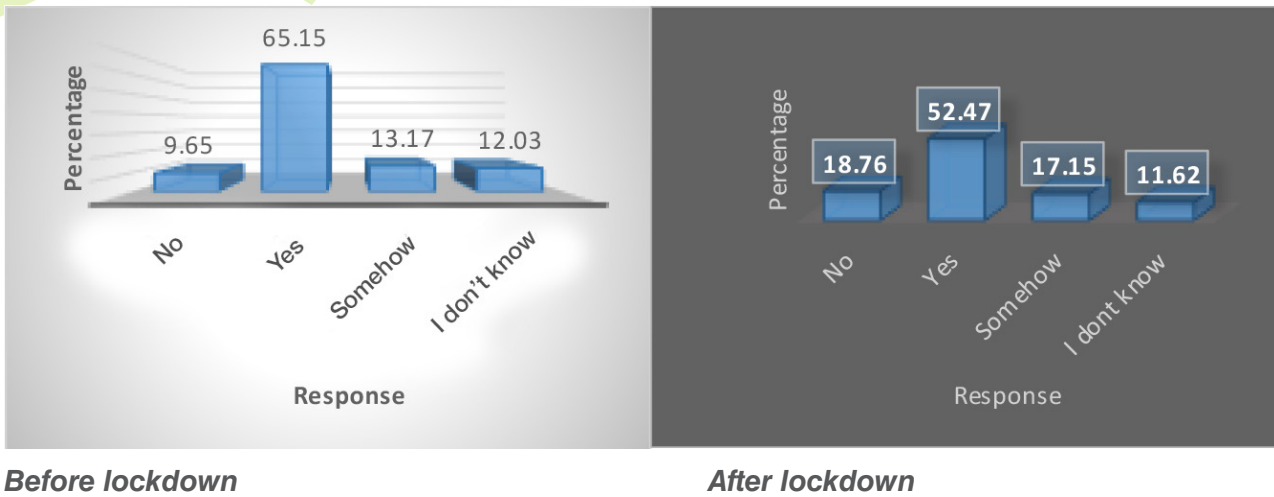


Figure 24: Was the household able to achieve three meals daily before and during the lockdown?

Figure 25 shows the distribution of respondents between the two municipalities in the study area. Up to 61.46% of the respondents resided in Matiele while 38.54% lived in Winnie Madikizela.

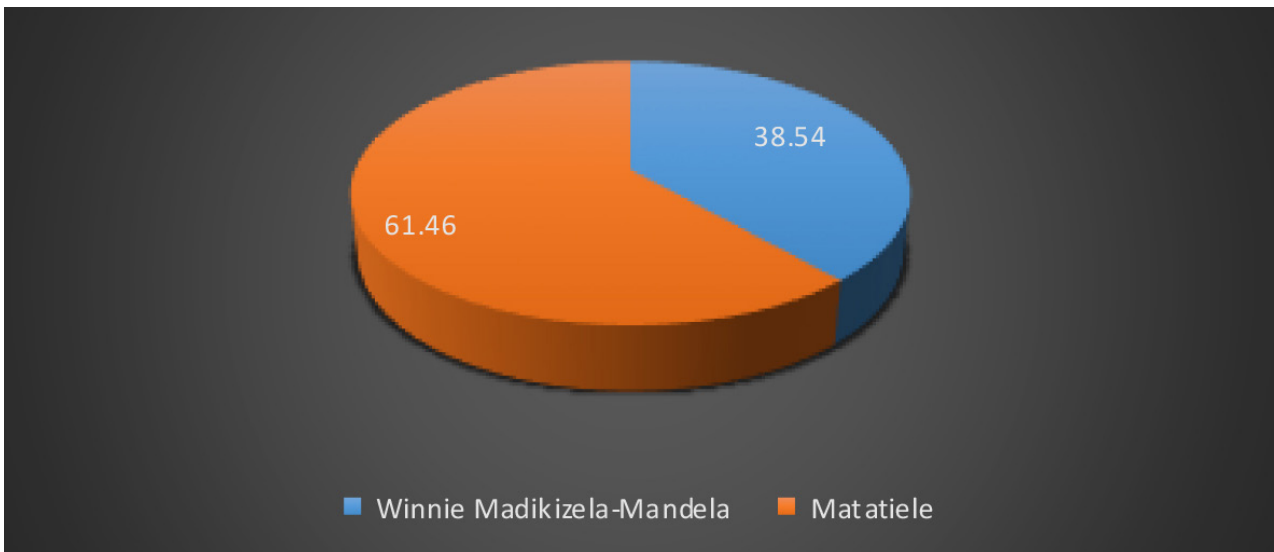


Figure 25: Location

Figure 26 shows the age distribution of the respondents. About one-quarter of the respondents are between the age bracket 30-39years. This is followed by those between the ages 40-49 (22.23%). Also followed by those within age 20-29 (16.91%). This shows that the age distribution covers the prime age the most.

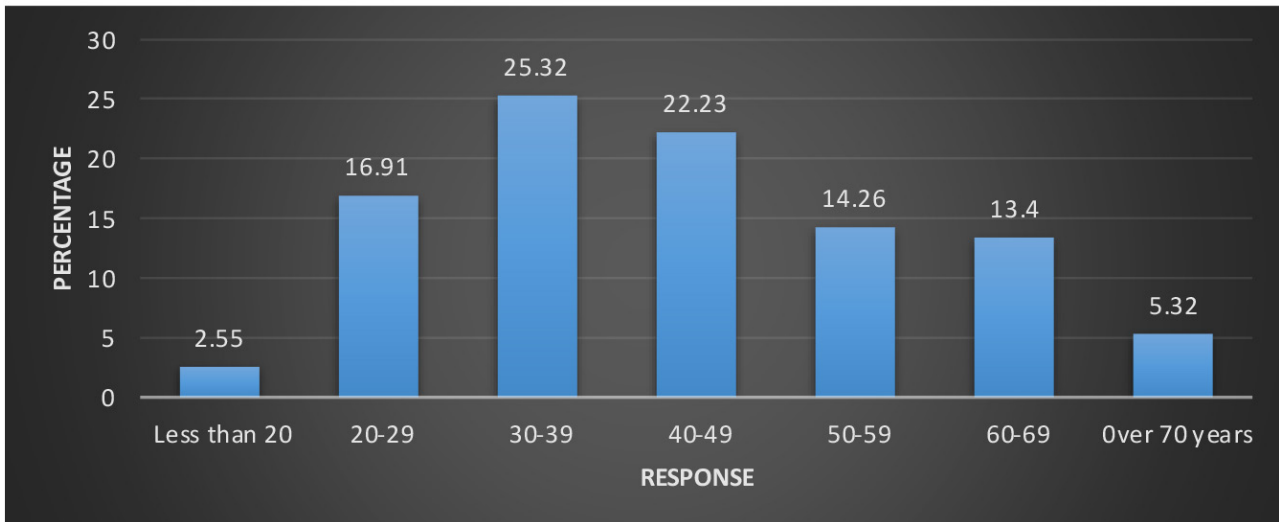


Figure 26: Age of respondents

Figure 27 shows the coping strategies adopted by the respondents to survive the pandemic. About half (49.79%) of the respondents spent their savings. A considerable proportion (28.67%) of the respondents reported their family member(s) left home in search of work. One in five (22.58%) borrowed money while (13.05%) purchased food on credit. Some (8.07%) even went as far as begging while very few (4.12%, 2.23% and 2.23%) reduced their expenditure; sold household assets and sold herbs respectively.

Coping Strategies



Figure 27: Coping strategies



Summary of key findings

Based on the above, the following main findings were observed;

- ♣ Majority of the respondents received contributions to the social groups they belong during the pandemic. These include but not limited to financial support, food and groceries, emotional and spiritual support.
- ♣ Majority of the respondents did not make contributions to the local institutions such as the traditional leaders and local government.
- ♣ Awareness was generally low among the respondents about the activities of local institutions both government and NGOs, FBOs etc, during the pandemic.
- ♣ Some of the government programmes did not translated in to improved earnings due largely to poor awareness.
- ♣ The ratio of income consumed by those already spending more before increased and vice versa.
- ♣ The number of people that were able to have three meals per day reduced during the pandemic.
- ♣ Income reduced a bit for most of the people that earned above the minimum wage in South Africa while the income effect was not so felt among those below the minimum wage bracket.
- ♣ Most people recourse to their savings while in the hit of the pandemic, some recourse to begging.

Recommendations

Given the above findings;

- ♣ The government and local social institutions should design awareness programmes about their programmes, policies and initiatives that are routed through associations and groups.
- ♣ More attention should be given to the rural areas in terms of capacity building programmes that can increase financial dependence among the rural dwellers.
- ♣ Social, religious, and cultural groups should be more empowered through well monitored funding and disaster preparedness programmes for their members.

References

Further Reading: In-Depth Academic Publications

Throughout our comprehensive research journey, we have distilled our findings and analyses into three academic publications that delve deeper into our study's theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and intricate nuances. These publications offer an enriched academic discourse, providing a detailed understanding of the subject matter. We highly recommend accessing these publications for readers keen on diving deeper into the academic dimensions of our findings and engaging with more detailed analysis. They substantiate the technical report's insights and provide a broader context, further enriching the knowledge landscape around rural dynamics in the face of pandemics.

Okem, AE; Mubangizi, BC; Adekanla, NC, John, SF & I Barry. Examining the COVID-19 Coping Strategies Employed by Residents in Selected South Africa's Rural Areas. *Review of Economics and Development Studies*, Vol. 9 (2) 2023, 87-98. DOI: 10.47067/reads.v9i2.483.

John, S.F., Okem, A.E., Mubangizi, B.C., Adekanla, N., Ngubane, L.P. & Barry, I., 2022, 'Rural vulnerability and institutional dynamics in the context of COVID-19: A scoping review', *Jàmà: Journal of Disaster Risk Studies* 14 (1), a1227. <https://doi.org/10.4102/jamba.v14i1.1227>.

Mubangizi, BC; Okem,AE; John, SF; Ngubane, LP; Barry, I; Adekanla, N and Nyawo, JC Unpacking Reported Impacts of COVID-19 in Rural Contexts: Evidence from Two Rural Municipalities in South Africa. Forthcoming – *Journal of African Renaissance*.



