

The impact of COVID19 on the millions who work informally in South Africa

Statement issued by ten organisations representing informal workers

20th March 2020

We are a network of organisations representing informal workers in South Africa. Our members work in the following sectors: domestic work, waste picking/reclaiming in the streets and on landfill sites, street and market traders, home based craft and garment work, community care work, the taxi sector, and artisanal fishing.

If you add our ranks to informal workers in other sectors, including agriculture and the restaurant sector, we number just under 5 million workers. This is according to recent government statistics (Quarterly Labour Force Surveys), and it compares to 10.8 million formally employed workers. We constitute 30% of working South Africans.

Some of us have employers, but are informally employed by virtue of not being registered for Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act (COIDA) or any other employment related social security schemes. This goes for the majority of domestic, agricultural, and taxi workers, whose employers are not compliant with relevant labour laws, including the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) and Sectoral Determinations which set out minimum employment conditions.

Nearly one in every five of all workers who have an employer, are informal in this sense. This means that in the current Coronavirus crisis, where our jobs are at high risk, we have no social security to fall back on. And most of our employers ignore the law with regard to paid annual and/or sick leave. We have little or no expectation that our employers will follow either the COVID-19 Advisory or the Workplace Preparedness Guidelines published by the Employment and Labour Department this week. We call on the inspectorate of the Department of Employment and Labour to target non-compliant employers, including employers of domestic workers, in this regard. And employers must not be allowed to send us home with no pay!

The rest of us who are in informal employment are self-employed. We number just under 1.8 million people. Our work is already seriously impacted by the crisis. We too have nothing to fall back on. We provide affordable goods and services to communities, some of which, like the collection of recyclables, create huge savings for municipalities. But none of the statements from the Employment and Labour Department address the fall-out we are currently experiencing, and which we know will get much worse.

Almost all of us informal workers live day-by-day on our very small incomes. When the bottom falls out of our work, we and our families will starve.

We therefore call on government to make urgent arrangements to redirect funds from the UIF surplus, and from large events that have been cancelled, and other sources, and establish a Living Cash Grant to all informal workers, regardless of nationality. This would enable vulnerable informal workers to comply with calls to self-isolate where feasible, without losing their livelihoods, and go on to survive the worst times to come.

In the meantime, while we have no option but to continue to earn our livelihoods, we call on the different tiers of government to help make our work safer with the following urgent interventions:-

1. The mass provision of protective masks and gloves to all informal workers, especially those working with members of the public, organic and waste materials, and where cash exchanges hands;
2. The mass provision of water, soap and sanitizers in public spaces, especially where we work.
3. The issuing of health guidelines for different sectors of the informal economy

We are doing what we can to implement government's advice on good hygiene practice, but without such interventions it is almost impossible. We expect to be directly consulted about the implementation of such interventions so that the right people in the right places will be reached.

We also call on government, the trade union federations, and big business to ensure that in all NEDLAC discussions going forward, representatives of organised workers in the informal economy are invited to participate in order to present the perspectives of workers in the informal economy, including self-employed workers. We did not see any recognition of the Coronavirus challenges that we face in the publicity following the recent NEDLAC meeting, and we believe that this is a serious omission which is not helpful to the whole nation.

This crisis creates an opportunity for government, the trade union federations and society at large to take stock and recognise all informal workers in line with the International Labour Organisation's Recommendation 204. It is a reminder of the low levels of legal compliance of many employers in this country, and also a reminder of the enormous contribution that self-employed workers make. It is an opportunity for government to redirect substantial resources into getting our health system ready to assist everybody who needs it right now.

Our voices must be heard in finding solutions to the current COVID 19 crisis, but also in finding lasting solutions to the long term crisis of poverty, inequality and unemployment. Now is the time for worker and community solidarity the likes of which we have never seen before.

Issued by

1. South African Waste Pickers Association, SAWPA. Contact person Simon Mbata 066 62191232 or Maditlhare Koena 068 5954500
2. South African Domestic, Services and Allied Workers Union, SADSAWU. Contact person Myrtle Witbooi 078 8414382
3. African Reclaimers Organisation, ARO. Contact person Eva Mokoena 060 3215800
4. South African Informal Traders Alliance, SAITA. Contact person Rosheda Muller 078 7651737
5. Johannesburg Informal Traders Platform, JITP. Contact person Lulama Mali 076 1727540
6. SA Public Transport Workers Union, SAPTWU. Contact person Clement Doncabe 078 9222008
7. Durban Fishermen's Forum, South Durban Community Environmental Alliance SDCEA. Contact person Des D'Sa 031 4611991, 083 9826939
8. Community Health Workers KZN. Contact person Nomvula Sibisi 078 7895821
9. Women in Informal Employment, Globalizing and Organising, WIEGO. Contact person Pat Horn 076 7065282 www.wiego.org
10. South African Self-Employed Women's Association. Contact Person Thandiwe Xulu 082 224 8509