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NEVA MAKGETLA: How we can make it easier to isolate in crowded communities

SA's history is littered with failed initiatives because people have been required to comply with impossible demands

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An informal settlement in Soweto. Picture: REUTERS/SIPHIWE SIBEKO

Image:

In SA, as in the rest of the world, the lockdown is often portrayed as an all-out war on Covid-19. That puts security personnel in the front line, amid calls for patriotic discipline.

But SA's history suggests another metaphor: to succeed, we need a popular movement of informed citizens who seek to maintain physical distance despite the high cost to incomes and comfort, and to wash their hands. That is, we need to make citizens the subject, not the object, of the lockdown.

In practice, collective action has been key to success so far. Millions have dutifully stayed home, even with no police or army in sight. In the morning, quiet and birdsong have largely replaced the freeway hum. Yet some communities have seen large-scale rule-breaking, with queuing crowds, children playing in the street and packed taxis. But there too the security forces have seemed mostly ineffective or simply absent.

Most reports of risky behaviour come from SA's informal settlements, which hold about 1.2-million households, or 8% of the total, and where Covid-19 could be explosive. New York has experienced a horrific outbreak partly because it is the densest city in the US — but it is spacious compared with Alex.

For people who live in informal settlements it is almost impossible to lock down completely. About 40% of the houses have a single room, while the rest mostly have two or three. A third of residents live alone, and a quarter have at least one small child. Yet fewer than 1% have internet access, only half have a television set, and one in seven has pay TV. Three-quarters use a communal tap. And only 40% have a refrigerator, which necessitates more shopping trips.

The 1980s proved that there are never enough police or army members to lock down every block, and that criminalising communities never works. Instead of empty threats and calls for discipline, clever policy would ask how to make the lockdown easier.

It would start by recognising that a 24/7 lock-up isn't possible for people in tiny spaces with no yard. Instead, it could designate, for instance, blocks as household spaces for the lockdown, and emphasise keeping physical distance and staying very close to home. Isolation from family and friends is also rough if you can't afford phone calls for much of the month, so the government could allocate free data and voice time. And it would help if community leaders were mobilised to show up personally to encourage people to stay close to home and keep their distance in queues, and to help solve problems as they arise.

All the evidence is that behaviour changes most and fastest when it's made easier, rather than seeing it as a test of character. SA's history since 1994 is littered with implementation systems that failed because they required people to comply with impossible demands. To take a contemporaneous example, taxis are now supposed to drive a third empty — but what if that means they run at a loss? In a free market, they would hike their prices. If that's ruled out they may need a subsidy to comply.

Falling back on the security forces to enforce the lockdown follows naturally from a persistent tendency in the government to adopt top-down developmental strategies. From social grants to housing to public health, most programmes since 1994 have sought to “deliver to the disadvantaged” as individuals or families, rather than to empower citizens to act collectively. Tellingly, the state devotes almost no resources to helping people organise into unions or community groups that would give historically disempowered people voice and space for action.

South Africans now face extraordinary social, political and economic challenges. Unless the government's measures empower people to respond appropriately, they won't succeed, even with escalating rhetoric of war and punishment.

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