

■ OPINION / COLUMNISTS

*Neva
Makgetla*
Columnist

NEVA MAKGETLA: U-turn on lockdown will not free up the poor

The government needs to do more by way of education and communication to stop the spread of Covid-19

🔒 BL PREMIUM

22 JUNE 2020 - 15:35



A nurse performs a swab test for Covid-19 in Lenasia, Johannesburg, May 13 2020. Picture: MICHELE SPATARI/AFP

The decision to allow personal services and in-door recreation such as casinos and restaurants, which pose a high risk of infection, marked an abrupt about-turn in the government's Covid-19 strategy. Now individuals are expected to manage the risk of infection while returning to work. Given SA's unusually deep inequalities, this new freedom means many people face impossible choices. To paraphrase Anatole France: Once again, both rich and poor are free to go to work, buy alcohol, sleep under bridges and beg in the streets.

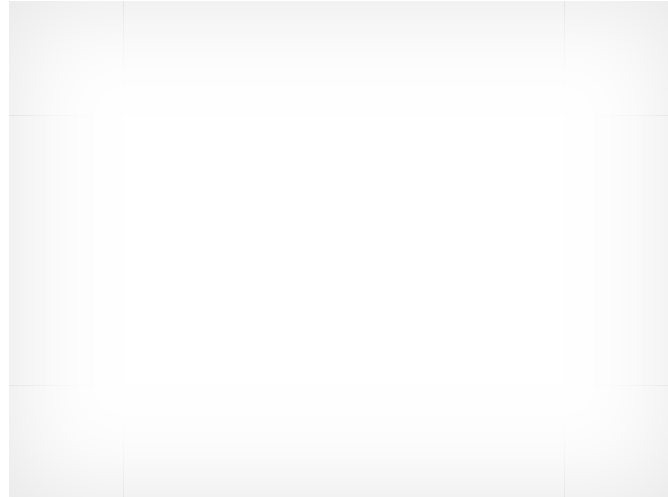
Four factors underpin the shift in strategy. First, high-risk businesses lobbied heavily to reopen earlier than originally planned. Experience in other policy areas, notably trade and the climate crisis, demonstrates that lobbying is most effective when a small interest group suffers visible costs from measures that ultimately would provide greater but less tangible benefits to the majority.

Second, the government seems undecided whether Covid-19 is like a flu epidemic or like more serious diseases such as tuberculosis (TB) or HIV/Aids. With the flu, hospitals prepare for a spike but know it will dissipate without causing too much harm. The continual forecasts of a peak in Covid-19 cases make both an escalation in

cases and its ultimate disappearance seem similarly inevitable. In contrast, TB and HIV will not simply disappear. The only solution is to change behaviour to prevent infection.

Third, programmes to limit the harm to low-income households from the lockdown have faced growing pushback. The Unemployment Insurance Fund's fund managers fought to keep its billions in surplus under their control; the Treasury sees huge sums going out of the door for enhanced grants while its revenues plummet. Ultimately, even the unions advocated sending members back to work despite the risk, because they could not count on continued relief for the jobless.

ADVERTISING



Finally, the lockdown was mostly left to securocrats, with arbitrary rules and occasionally harsh enforcement. SA's security systems still largely reflect the long and painful history of oppression in low-income communities. We saw police and soldiers in the townships, not the rich suburbs; some casual brutality for minor infractions; and a near-complete failure to empower communities rather than just ordering them to comply.

The new strategy in effect reverses that approach, forcing citizens to decide as individuals how to manage the risks of infection. That is appealing if you have the resources to work from home or practise physical distancing at work, and don't need public transport. It is less liberating if you live in crowded housing, have risky work such as underground mining or hairdressing, and have to take a poorly ventilated, overfilled taxi to work. Moreover, as the incidence of Covid-19 rises, it increases the danger and limitations faced by people who are vulnerable because of their age, weight or health status.

A conventional public health approach, in contrast, treats collective action as key to controlling contagions. In that context the government's core role is to empower especially low-income communities to minimise transmission.

In practice, government support is now limited to regulations on operations in workplaces and public transport, often without much enforcement, as well as a ban on family and social gatherings outside churches, funerals, restaurants and casinos. Public education remains scarce and dense settlements still mostly lack the resources needed to prevent Covid-19 from spreading. A new ministerial advisory committee on behavioural change is dominated by religious and traditional leaders with a sprinkling of activists and members of NGOs, but contains neither cultural influencers nor social scientists.

Covid-19 is spreading at an exponential rate. Failing to contain it will deal a huge blow to both the economy and to families. In these circumstances, the government cannot simply move from micromanagement to abdication of almost all responsibility for limiting the contagion. That is especially true in SA's deeply unequal society, where most people and communities don't have the resources they need to protect themselves.

• *Makgetla is a senior researcher with Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies.*



BUSINESSDAY.CO.ZA

South Korea's Moon Jae-in accuses John Bolton of fact distortion over North Korea talks



BUSINESSDAY.CO.ZA

Shopping mall footfall shows improvement, Growthpoint says



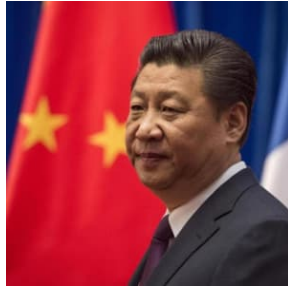
BUSINESSDAY.CO.ZA

Gold loses ground ahead of eurozone data



BUSINESSDAY.CO.ZA

LETTER: Zuma's trial is chance for him, Mbeki, Manuel and Erwin to come clean on arms deal



BUSINESSDAY.CO.ZA

China demonstrates its commitment to Africa with aid and solidarity to overcome Covid crisis



BUSINESSDAY.CO.ZA

Solidarity Fund approves R1.4bn for Covid-19 support