



Hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers were camped outside the UNHCR offices in Cape Town for several weeks in October 2019.
Photo: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND DURING COVID-19:

Relief workers' concern for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers

In South Africa, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have disproportionate access to socioeconomic resources and health-care services. Findings of qualitative research conducted by the HSRC illustrate how this inequality may have been exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. By *Allanise Cloete, Adlai Davids and Priscilla Reddy*

In March 2020, South Africans were hurtled into a hard lockdown to curb the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. HSRC researchers realised that the pandemic and resultant movement restrictions could increase the vulnerability of already marginalised groups such as migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. However, their hands were tied. Infection-control regulations put in place for the protection of researchers and research participants meant they could not conduct field work in these communities to understand how the disaster affected their lives.

The researchers therefore reached out to relief aid workers, advocacy NGOs and leaders of civil society organisations that were in contact with these communities. As part of a qualitative research study, they conducted telephonic interviews from 5 to 18 April with seven of the respondents in the Western Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal.

Exclusion from social and economic assistance

The relief aid workers were concerned that migrant communities struggled to pay for rental housing. Food insecurity and an overall fear of the unknown nature of the disease added to the trauma brought by the pandemic:

"It's very difficult and I don't know what we are going to do month-end. We don't know about the rent with regard to the landlord so at least we manage to buy food but the rent we don't know about. I am not sure [if] the lockdown will be extended. ... So at least if they can allow people to go and sell stuff to survive, so they can have money during lockdown." – Male, advocacy organisation for migrant communities, Western Cape

The informal trade sector serves as the primary source of income for many migrant communities in South Africa. Casual work opportunities and street vending were not allowed during the lockdown, and migrants, refugees and asylum seekers suffered because of this.

Relief aid workers had concerns for migrants working in the informal sector and on contract, as they had no social or economic assistance or protection:

"I think we [have] a problem. I mean people won't work for three months. Some people are working, some people are not

working, how can [they] get money, that's a problem." – Male, relief aid worker, Gauteng

Relief aid workers feared that the South African government's national social and economic interventions clearly targeted registered South Africans and excluded undocumented migrants. No special dispensation was created to provide for migrants, even though some fell into the 'poorest of the poor' category. Relief aid workers perceived this as discriminatory:

"You remember when the president was talking about measures; there was no single mention on what is going to happen to migrants in South Africa ... nothing. While other people would apply for UIF or [for the] Solidarity Fund. I mean nobody, whether they had valid documents or not, [can] also apply for that. You will remember even the Minister of Community and Development said that only South African-run or -owned [businesses] would benefit). You find it discriminatory but at the same time, you know, [it] made me think that there is nowhere that they can go for help, so to speak. I mean, there are food parcels being collected, there's activities around to try and alleviate the suffering of the poorest of the poor, but ... there's nobody that's focusing on the migrant community ..." – Male, relief aid worker for migrant communities, KwaZulu-Natal

No planned social and economic relief interventions included the needs of migrant communities with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to relief aid workers, this exclusion further exacerbated the already vulnerable situation in which migrant communities in South Africa find themselves.

Unmet basic needs vs COVID-19

According to one of the relief aid workers, having to cope with COVID-19 becomes traumatic when having to choose between purchasing hand sanitisers as a precautionary measure or daily essentials such as food in order to survive:

"I think also the condition of living does not allow them to buy sanitisers ... Also with the lockdown, I am worried about the condition that they have to earn income every day ... Those are more vulnerable and the situation

will be worse whereby they would not care about getting the corona[virus], they will care about how to get food." – Female, relief aid worker, KwaZulu-Natal

The overcrowded and unstable housing conditions often experienced by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers make maintaining social distancing challenging:

"I would be very concerned about refugees because [of] the conditions they are living in. The people are staying in one flat like two families, they are sharing one flat, and it's not easy to distance [from] one another." – Female, relief aid worker, KwaZulu-Natal

"We know most Malawians, 99%, they do not have IDs and you know there is the danger; they live in overcrowd[ed] rooms, seven to eight people per room. It is [a] concern and lack of resources, they don't have money, [this] can affect their daily nutrition, they don't eat nice, which can weaken the immune system and this is danger[ous] for us." – Leader of a migrant umbrella organisation, Gauteng

In these unstable environments, the general health and wellbeing of migrants might already have been compromised. Moreover, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers might be reluctant to access health-care services because of their undocumented status; in turn, this might reduce the effectiveness of public-health interventions and processes aimed at containment of COVID-19. Hence, public-health efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 should include migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

During the writing of this article, the Scalabrini Centre brought a case against the Minister of Social Development in the Gauteng North High Court in Pretoria, centring on the exclusion of asylum seekers and other migrants from access to the R350 per month COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant. On 18 June 2020, the High Court ruled in favour of the Scalabrini Centre.

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