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## COVID-19 AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

The World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global health crisis within the two weeks of its emergence. The WHO's stance was indicative of the extent to which the COVID-19 could impact on the human life and global economy. South Africa as part of the world economy has experienced considerable influence of COVID-19 pandemic on the local people's health and economy. Whilst the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt on all aspects of life, the impact of the pandemic on rural economy in South Africa could be more severe considering the economic situation this pandemic found South Africa into. Hence, this article focuses on rural development in the era of COVID-19 in South Africa. Rural development has been negatively affected by the pandemic, and this comes against a backdrop of failing state interventions to drive rural development in South Africa since the start of democratic dispensation. This article is based on an exploratory research design and used a desktop research to examine rural development in the COVID-19 era in South Africa. The article argues that local government as the closet sphere of government to the people, working as part of a multidisciplinary team, ought to play a significant role in addressing the rural development implications of the pandemic.

### KEY WORDS

South Africa, COVID-19, rural development, local government.

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has caused a serious global crisis that has been characterised by multiple knock-on effects on societies and economies throughout the world (OECD 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has hit both the developing and developed nations alike. The impact of the pandemic on global economy and societies at large is unprecedented as it "has created a demand shock, a supply shock, and a financial shock all at once (Triggs & Kharas 2020 cited in Bauer, 2020:1). Scholars have estimated that the economic turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic exceeds the global financial and economic crisis that occurred in 2008 in scale and regional differentiation (Li et al, 2021; OECD, 2021). The pandemic has caused massive job losses and put many livelihoods at risk as results of lockdowns that has been imposed in an attempt to curtail the spread of the virus. A number of studies have examined the impact of COVID-19 pandemic in different dimensions, with many focusing specifically on the economy and health. However, there has not been any study that has specifically focussed on rural development in the era COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, this article focuses on rural development in the era of COVID-19 in South Africa. The article is based on an exploratory research design and used a desktop research to examine rural development in the COVID-19 era in South Africa. Desktop research may also be referred to as secondary research (Hague & Wilcock, 2015). This secondary research entailed analysing extant literature other scholars have collected through primary research (Zeka, Rootman & Kruger, 2017). The paper is structured as follows: the first is introduction. This is followed by the state of rural development in South Africa; next is the COVID-19 and rural development in South Africa, which form the third section of this paper. The fourth section focused on the role of local governments in South Africa dealing with the outbreak of COVID-19. The seventh section is devoted to conclusion and the recommendations.

*Policy Context of Rural Development in South Africa.* The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) enjoins government to undertake planning, coordination and implementation of development (including rural development) as one of the key cornerstones



of South Africa as a developmental state (Olivier, van Zyl and Williams, 2010). Therefore, the iterative failure of South African government to drive rural development is major cause for concern. It is our considered view that the Reconstruction for Development Programme (RDP), the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy, the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative (AsgiSA), and the New Growth Path (NGP) and more recently the National Development Plan (NDP) vision 2030 all have not realised South Africa rural development aspirations. In addition, even the more focused initiatives such as the Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Strategy (ISRDS), the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP), the Agri-Parks Programme and the National Rural Youth Services Corps (NARYSEC) all have not yielded the desired results.

A remarkable situation concretises the foregoing notion are the continually rising figures in rural-urban migration in South Africa. The phenomenon of rural-urban migration is off course not a unique problem to South Africa (Ntshidi, 2017). However, the issue of rural-urban migration has become more prevalent in South Africa as government estimates that 80% of the country's population may relocate to the country's metropolitan areas by 2050 (BrandSA, 2017). Collinson and Ginsburg (2019: 1) postulates that "Economic disparities, inequality and unemployment, particularly among young people" remain one of the causes of rural-urban migration in South Africa, as the metropolitan areas holds the promise of improved conditions for people from the rural areas. The lack of efficient service delivery in South Africa could argued to be one of the major drivers of rural-urban migration. Moloto, Mkhomazi and Worku (2020: 645) posited that "The level of service delivery in rural communities is less than compared to urban areas and furthermore, there is no sign of improvement".

Broadly, the reasons for migration from rural to urban areas maybe categorised under economic, social, political, cultural or environmental (StatsSA, 2018). The impacts of COVID-19 on rural development in South Africa maybe far reaching, substantial and devastating. The rural communities are usually based on self-employment which are mainly small in size which implies that they maybe highly vulnerable due to lack of cash in hand and low resilience (Ali, Ahmed and Hassan, 2021). Moreover, Phillipson *at al.* (2020) opines that rural areas are usually not prepared to withstand the storm during extremely uncertain times like COVID-19 era. Therefore, this paper aims to establish the preliminary effects of COVID-19 pandemic on rural development in South Africa. The next section discusses the state of rural development in South Africa and attempt to locate the discussion in the context COVID-19 pandemic.

*The State of Rural Development in South Africa.* Rural development is a contested concept as there is no single straightforward definition for this concept. However, there seems to be an agreement in literature on rural development that the term encapsulates the state led interventions carried out mainly in rural communities with the main aim of improving the social and economic situation for the people living in rural communities (Mlambo, 2018; Tshishonga, 2020). In the context of South Africa, it has been, widely acknowledged literature, that there was a paucity of investment directed towards rural development in the country prior to the democratic dispensation (Makgetla 2010; Jacobs & Hart, 2014; Tshishonga, 2020). Consequently, rural areas were entrapped to underdevelopment and impoverishment (Jacobs & Hart, 2014). In this regard, in the chapter 6 of the NDP it is broadly envisage that "By 2030, South Africa's rural communities should have greater opportunities to participate fully in the economic, social and political life of the country" (National Planning Commission, 2012).

The theory of rural development in South Africa has been associated with poverty reduction and agricultural development. This could be attributed to the fact that most poor people in South Africa reside in rural areas and they are reliant on agriculture as their main source of livelihood (World Bank 2020). Notably, rural development policies in South Africa before 1994 were largely confined to provide support to white commercial farmers and maintaining exclusion and exploitation of the black labour workforce based in the congested rural homelands that were reserved for Africans under apartheid policies (Binns, Hill & Nel, 1997). The consequence of these policies has been triple challenges of presently rising



unemployment, inequality and poverty especially in rural communities. Recently, the World Bank (2019) identified South Africa as the most unequal country in the world. The World Bank's (2019) thesis was concretised by the recent StatsSA (2020) report that South Africa's unemployment rate has reached 34,4% and thus making the country's unemployment highest in the world. Moreover, the World Bank's (2021) data illustrate that more than 55% of South Africa's population live in poverty and that almost 25% of the population experience food security. The reports from the World Bank (2021) and StatsSA (2020) contends that the lack of progress in alleviating poverty and inequality in South Africa is driven by a lack of economic growth, a non-performing labour market and a poor business climate in all spheres of government. At the local sphere of government, the challenges are even more calamitous as most of the rural based municipalities in South Africa lack the important human and physical (infrastructure) resources to permit them to deliver basic services to their residents (Auditor General, 2020).

In line with the above, Noruwana (2015) noted that people in rural communities in South Africa have been complaining about the lack of service delivery in almost all of the 283 local municipalities and there seems to be no trust that the level of service delivery will ever improve. In the same way, Moloto, Mkhomazi and Worku (2020) posits that people in rural areas in South Africa faces a myriad of challenges such as unemployment, low income and poor quality of social services and these challenges are compounded by inability of local government to render service delivery in an effective and efficient manner. Generally, people in remote areas of South Africa have limited choices in the social and economic terms when compared to those in metropolitan areas (Moloto, Mkhomazi & Worku, 2020). Therefore, the challenges facing the rural based local municipalities in South Africa are a major cause of concern as they impede rural development in the country. Mlambo (2018: 68) suggested the next interventions that could be adopted by the state to drive rural development in South Africa: 1) Incentivise skilled professionals who opt to work in rural areas; 2) Coordinate policies with local/traditional leaders; 3) Promote agricultural development through skill development; and 4) Infrastructure development and eradicate poverty. Mlambo (2018) argue that without potent state led inventions coupled with adequate investments in rural development, South Africa may continue to experience challenges such as rural-urban migration which also lead a plethora of challenges in metropolitan areas.

*COVID 19 and Rural Development in South Africa.* Khambule (2020) argue that the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic created a plethora of global challenges in the social, political and economic development sphere that may severely confront the sustainability of the development that has been achieved globally. Unsurprisingly, Shafi *et al.* (2021) postulated that the emergence of COVID-19 has caused significant damage to health, businesses and societies globally. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global health crisis within the two weeks of its emergence. The WHO's stance was indicative of the extent to which the COVID-19 could impact on the human life and global economy. South Africa as part of the world economy has experienced considerable influence of COVID-19 pandemic on the local people's health and economy (Arndt et al, 2021). We argue that whilst the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt on all aspects of life, the impact of the pandemic on rural economy in South Africa could be more severe considering the economic situation this pandemic found South Africa into. Before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the South African economy had already entered recession (Khambule, 2021) and the unemployment rate had risen significantly reaching highest level in over a decade (The Presidency, 2021). In addition, challenges of poverty and inequality remained deeply embedded, and the fiscal position of the country was already dwindling as a result of the lower than anticipated revenue earnings and incessantly rising sovereign debt (The Presidency, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic heralded significant challenge to South Africa's economy considering the already weak economic performance experienced prior to the outbreak. Significant budgetary changes had to be made quickly in order to reprioritise monies to the fight against the pandemic. Consequently, rural development has been treated as peripheral and insignificant aspect during COVID-19 pandemic crisis as enormous focus is put to the



economy and health. This has been to the detriment of those who live in rural areas as poverty and inequality persist in South Africa. There is remarkable exemplified in the paucity of investments made to support rural economy in the era COVID-19 crisis. Notably, the urban areas have received significant attention from the governments throughout the world on the basis that urban areas have been hit hard by the crisis (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2021). However, De Luca, Tondelli and Aberg (2020) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic poses significant challenges to the rural areas that are heightened by lack of income for many in rural areas, not easily accessible healthcare services and greater isolations problems. The imposition of lockdown restrictions interrupted social mobility in South Africa and restricted access to some basic needs such as food and other important resources. In addition, lockdowns negatively affected people's livelihood opportunities, more especially in rural areas throughout the world (Shafi *et al*, 2021).

In the context of South Africa, the government, in line with global trends, introduced unprecedented measures to curtail the spread of COVID-19 pandemic and to reduce its impacts on people, businesses and the economy. The measures taken such controlled access to retail stores, required quarantine and lockdowns, many people became vulnerable to psychological problems triggered by social distancing and isolations requirements. Consequently, the programme of rural development has been negatively affected by the pandemic, and this comes against a backdrop of failing state interventions to drive rural development in South Africa since the start of democratic dispensation. Despite all the rural development interventions that been pursued since 1994, the people in rural areas continues to significantly experience a lack of economic opportunities in their local communities. It is against this backdrop that the focus our article turns now to explore the role of local government in South Africa in the era of COVID-19 pandemic.

*The Role of Local Government in the Era of COVID-19 Pandemic.* Since the dawn of democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994, the relevance of local government has been constantly increasing. With the first democratic local government elections held in December 5, 2000 (Training & Education Unit, n.d), the significance of local government in South Africa was formally inaugurated. This commenced with the wave of democratic decentralisation of powers in the country. Markedly, the process of democratic decentralisation in South Africa was introduced during the transition period between 1994, 1996 and 2000 and this has since been codified expressly in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996 and in the Municipal Structures Act, 1998, (Chilenga-Butao, 2020). The democratic decentralisation of powers intended to enable local government to carry out wide range responsibilities such as service delivery, local economic development etc. Local government is the sphere of government that has proximity to the citizens (Gutierrez, 2015).

Globally, it is accepted that local government, as the closest sphere of government to the people, has become a frontline respondent to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hlati & Maziwisa, 2020). Since the start of the pandemic, the local governments throughout the world have actively worked with central governments and security bodies to try and contain the spread and impact of the COVID-19 health crisis and its social and economic ramifications (OECD, 2020). In South Africa, like in many other countries, local government has been at the forefront delivering essential services to the people. Notable, the local government in South Africa has constitutional mandate to play a developmental role in the affairs of the country. This is expressed in Section 152(c) and in Section 153(a) of the country's constitution where it is stated that the local government must promote social and economic development in the country. It is envisaged that the developmental role that the local government is enjoins to plays shall assist the country in quest to achieve its developmental state ambitions.

Accordingly, the role of local government in the era of COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa in addressing the rural development implications of the pandemic requires our attention. In large Metropolitans like eThekweni, Tshwane, Cape Town and Johannesburg wide range of economic relief measures were undertaken during the start of the pandemic and continue to be undertaken to date. For instance, Hlati and Maziwisa (2020: 2) observed that "under lockdown level five, metros such as the City of Johannesburg and the City of



Tshwane implemented measures such as issuing temporary permits for informal traders, including spaza shops”. Likewise, as observed by Kochanov, Hong and Mutambatsere (2020:3) “the City of Cape Town rolled out COVID-19 testing booths and spent 70 million South African rand (\$4.1 million) to implement a COVID-19 preparedness plan that included retrofitting clinics and setting up overflow facilities”. This backdrop demonstrates that the metros were agile and to some degree prepared to deal with the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the same could not be said about the municipalities located in the rural outskirts of the country. As it was observed by Matseke (2022: 91) “The fight against COVID-19 in rural areas may be much more challenging due to the limited resources and lack of proximity to resources”. Generally, the municipalities in rural areas have limited fiscal and monetary powers and as well as human and physical resources to permit them to perform their duties optimally. The emergence of COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that these municipalities relook into their financial and human resources in order to respond to the pandemic. In trying to strengthen the capacity of local municipalities, the national government announced a massive R20 billion relief financial support to be made accessible by the municipalities for the delivery of emergency services to their residents (The Presidency, 2020). This funding was intended for the at risks municipalities that mainly consisted of rural municipalities (Matseke, 2020). In spite the funding allocation made by the national government, the municipalities in rural areas experienced a plethora of challenges that included, inter alia, the disruption in supply and distribution of water tanks, tankers, and reduced income due to the reduction in revenue collections as a results of job losses incurred because the restrictions measures undertaken to combat the spread of the pandemic. Consequently, it could be argued that rural development programme which municipalities has been undertaking as part of local economic development goal was disrupted as result of COVID-19 pandemic.

*Conclusion.* The major objective of this article has been to examine rural development in South Africa in the COVID-19 era and ascertain the role of local government in addressing the rural development implications of the pandemic. In doing this, the article adopted an exploratory research design and used a desktop research to examine rural development in the COVID-19 era in South Africa. This essentially entailed the review of the existing literature on rural development in South Africa in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. As such this article presents the preliminary view of the state of rural development in South Africa in the era of COVID-19 as conceptualised by the author. Further research that in this regard will required to ascertain the fully extent of the situation. Nonetheless, the article reiterated that local government is the closet layer of government to the people and has an important role to play especially in rural communities in the era of COVID-19 pandemic. The article noted that some of the challenges experienced in rural communities from COVID-19 included among other things limited social mobility, job losses and limited income due to the measures that had been put in place in an attempt to curtail the spread of the pandemic. The programmes aimed at advancing rural economy were severely impacted by the pandemic because the restrictions that were imposed meant that the people would not be allowed to leave their homes to go work in the farms as most of the people in rural areas are reliant of agriculture and farming. The local municipalities faced challenges that included reduction in the revenue collection levels which significantly impacted on their ability to fulfil their responsibilities. This means that the municipalities themselves experienced their own challenges and that made it difficult for them to assist those in rural areas. This was demonstrated by the minimal role the municipalities played on aiding rural development programmes during the pandemic. Moreover, while there was a minimal role that the municipalities played such as provision of water supply, it remains not very clear what the municipalities did to support rural development. This maybe because they the pandemic found most them in dire state of affairs as most of them are grappling with governance and financial issues. However, for the rest of local government, the picture is not so clear given that most municipalities are grappling with the basic responsibility of providing basic services, some are faced with ongoing governance challenges, and some, with financial



management challenges. Therefore, this article suggests that COVID-19 pandemic provides a lesson for municipalities especially those located in rural parts of the country that they ought to forge partnerships with other stakeholders in order to make sure that they are able to respond to future challenges.

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