

Civil society needs to lead right now

By [Siphelele Chirwa](#)

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Covid-19 has removed the veil on real poverty in South Africa, showing us all what we have normalised: rampant unemployment and extreme poverty. It was always there; the coronavirus has just made us all more aware of it because of the immediate crisis.



Siphelele Chirwa, CEO, ACTIVATE Change Drivers

The challenges facing civil society are great. Extraordinary leadership will be required in the months going forward by NGOs. What we are seeing now is the rise of civil society during this crisis.

Civil society in the past three decades in South Africa has become less impactful. Pre-Covid, were we really heard? Were we really working together? In the past six weeks during lockdown, I have seen organisations coming together to work. The challenge remains in working together with government. The recent call by government to stop civil society distributing food came as a shock, as this is the time that we all come together to the aid of our most vulnerable.

In the world right now, civil society is being called on more and we need to collaborate and connect. The work happening on the ground in South Africa has been driven by civil society. In challenging times and during crisis, that is when you see the rise of civil society. I am in awe at those who have come through. We came together pre-democracy to fight Apartheid; and Covid-19 is showing us again that we can work together for one cause. NGOs need to reclaim that role.



#LockdownLessons: We are only as strong as our most vulnerable

Sindy Peters 18 May 2020



Social ills brushed off in the past

My biggest observation is that the challenges and the social ills within communities have been somehow brushed off in the past: the level of poverty; the level of unemployment; a nation in despair has somehow been normalised. 'SA youth are

unemployed'... that is what it is; 'people are living in poverty'... and we continue as a country. Covid-19 has shown us the reality of the poverty and uprooted all these things we have 'normalised' and held a mirror up to our faces so that we cannot ignore it.

My question is this – why does it take a pandemic like Covid-19 to get us to start working together, the haves and the have-nots? I have seen a lot of work happening in communities, where an affluent community will be cooking soup for a community where there are less resources and less equality. This looks good – but rise only now? Why do things need to fall apart before we help each other? That mirror was there all the time.



We are because of others

Amy Pieterse, Ginkgo Agency 15 May 2020



How do we continue supporting each other

Covid-19 is not showing us something unfamiliar. Unemployment has increased, but unemployment has always been there. Poverty has always been there. We celebrate the coming together of communities in fighting poverty and inequalities. My question post-Covid is do we go back to our normality? How do we continue supporting each other; how do we continue coming together; and also, how do we continue with the work that we do?

We need to reflect on some of the things that we as a nation, and the world, have tried to ignore: the plight of people who, due to the inequalities of this world, have been uprooted.



#LockdownLessons: Pandemic reminding us of importance of *ubuntu*, responsible kindness

Sindy Peters 13 May 2020



Youth a beacon of hope

As we call on the over 4,500 youth 'activators' who have gone through our leadership training programmes at Activate! Change Drivers, we have found our youth are a beacon of hope during this devastating time. We have seen our youth activators go out into their communities and make a difference on the ground. They are part of the solution, not the problem. These are the same youth who are seeing their promises of a future slip away once more, as the economy is crushed by this pandemic, yet they are out there in their communities, creating impact.

I live in awe at how much young people in South Africa have said, 'What can we do?', in response to this virus. Young

people are starting soup kitchens in their communities; they are gathering and distributing food parcels; they are training their elders in social distancing; helping with screening; being the source of information in their community WhatsApp groups by translating Covid information into their own languages so everyone could understand; they are out there on the frontlines of this battle against this invisible enemy. They didn't even wait to be mobilised, they just went out there and started creating change. That is what it is all about. That is why we do what we do.

It is time for civil society to come together with communities across the divide and ensure that this goodwill and *ubuntu* that has risen will continue to rise, so we can build the South Africa we truly want for everyone. Good can come out of this crisis if we continue doing good.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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