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REPORT ON IMPACT OF COVID-19 EMERGENCY WATER & SANITATION ROLL-OUT IN 14 LOW INCOME SETTLEMENTS IN KWAZULU-NATAL

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BACKGROUND

On 1 April 2020, just days after the imposition of the hard lockdown, BESG was one of 12 NGOs and social movements that were invited to engage with the Minister of Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation, Lindiwe Sisulu, on strategies to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 virus in informal settlements where we work. Top of the list were public health information, access to water, access to toilets that are cleaned regularly, food security, and access to low cost means of maintaining personal hygiene. And it needed a co-ordinated response.

On 21 April President Ramaphosa announced the R500bn Covid-19 emergency relief package, which included, *“Additional funding of R20-billion...to municipalities for the provision of emergency water supply, increased sanitisation of public transport and facilities, and providing food and shelter for the homeless.”*

We identified 14 settlements that were suffering water stress and lack of clean toilets to the National Department of Human Settlements’ (DHS) Covid-19 Informal Settlement Task Team. Two of our Human Settlements team, Khulekani Mfeka and Nomtha Sikhosana, were accredited to perform essential support services. Two community leaders in each settlement were to help monitor and direct service delivery efforts on the ground.

Challenges began to arise from the very outset. The community leaders were denied accreditation to perform essential services. They were able to perform their monitoring function and relay weekly reports to our field staff, although there was a significant margin for error and under-reporting while movement was severely restricted under emergency conditions – particularly in the larger settlements.

We took a conscious decision to ensure our staff took emergency food aid with them when planning field visits. However, access to sources of both government and private food aid was severely restricted and subject to some very questionable procurement decisions. Distribution of food aid was further hampered by CoGTA issuing a directive that effectively banned private distribution, while warehouses of food provided via the Solidarity Fund sat in warehouses without adequate logistical support to deliver in the first few critical weeks...and months. When we raised

our deep concerns about the impact at community level, and the DHS representative on the National Covid-19 Joint Command Centre took up the issue with her counterparts in Social Development, their response was, “*Stay in your own lane.*”

It was impossible for people to practice hand washing and personal hygiene when they did not have a reliable supply of potable water and/or adequate sanitation. In spite of the Informal Settlement Upgrading Programme being 10 years old, the pandemic highlighted the dire conditions still faced by some 1.3m households nationally.

Our focus thus became the monitoring of the R20bn roll-out of emergency services, in terms of improved access to water and sanitation. This was initially planned for a 3-month period, but due to logistical challenges – access to building materials and transport, and many local municipalities either closing their emergency call centres or operating with a skeleton staff during hard lockdown -- we extended the weekly monitoring programme to 6 months.



Mkondeni Sacca – 2 standpipes for 1,500 households

METHODOLOGY

Due to lockdown conditions we were only able to work with communities where there was a stable leadership that could manage contact and crowd control. When people are starving, it could potentially put our staff at risk. From this we selected 15 communities, of which 14 committed to the programme:

- eNdumeni Municipality: Dlamini, Hlaleleni
- eThekweni Municipality: Foreman Road, Bhambayi, and 6 small settlements in Ward 32
- Msunduzi Municipality: Dambuza, Denmark, Ezinketheni, Mkondeni Sacca
- Newcastle Municipality: Site P46 Stafford Hill
- Ray Nkonyeni Municipality: Mkhholombe (Port Shepstone)
- uMngeni Municipality: Mpophomeni/ KwaChief, Shiyabazali
- uMlalazi Municipality: Nkanini

For the core work of monitoring access to water and sanitation, we prepared a baseline assessment using a set of flexible questions. See [Table 1](#). The responses are captured in Column 1 of the accompanying [Timeline report](#) per community over the 6-month project duration.

TABLE 1: TELEPHONIC BASELINE SURVEY

<p>WATER AND SANITATION SUPPLY – TELEPHONIC BASELINE SURVEY</p> <p>General information:</p> <p>Name Location Contact persons (2) Access point(s) to settlement (nearest access roads(s), landmarks/ GPS co-ordinates) Number of H/H</p> <p>Water supply (may be more than 1, e.g., JoJo tanks supplemented by water tanker):</p> <p>Communal standpipes (& number): Communal ablution block (CAB) (& number): Mains fed water storage tanks (& number): Tanker fed water storage tanks (& number): Water tanker only (number & frequency): Other (Specify – e.g. – Silver City informal water reticulation throughout) Challenges: (e.g., 1 water tanker per week insufficient for population)</p> <p>Sanitation (may be a combination, e.g., self-built pit latrines & chemical toilets):</p> <p>Self-built pit latrines: VIPs (supplied by municipality): Communal ablution blocks (CABs): Chemical toilets: None: Challenges: (e.g., cleaners in CAB's have no PPE or cleaning materials, broken taps reported but not repaired)</p> <p>Food security:</p> <p>No households needing emergency food parcels: No distribution points in settlement (open space/ community hall where social distancing is practical):</p>

The results of the baseline assessment, and subsequent weekly fieldwork reports, were relayed to the Joint Command Centre via the DHS representative, with the intention that they be communicated down to Command Centres at provincial and local government levels.

Due to community members not having freedom of movement to buy airtime, we relayed calls on their behalf to the relevant authorities. It took not only airtime but extreme patience to try to obtain a response. The majority of local emergency call centres were either closed or unable to cope with the volume of calls:

**TABLE 2
MUNICIPAL WATER SERVICES RESPONSE EXERCISE 17 APRIL 2020**

Municipality	Number on website	Time of call	Outcome
Msunduzi	0800001868	12h06, 12h37, 13h11	Number not working
	0333923000	12h08, 13h10	Number not working
Newcastle	0343287600	12h43, 13h07	Number rings once and cuts off
eThekweni Metro	0803111111	12h09 to 12h24	Voice prompt kept announcing lines are busy – held the line for 15 minutes
King Cetshwayo District	0800203602	12h09, 12h35	Number busy
uMgungundlovu District	0800864911	12h24	Call answered within seconds- operator takes complaint and promises to forward to Water Services
uMzinyathi District	0342191500	12h37, 13h03	Rings but no answer
uGu District	0800092837	12h31	Call answered within seconds - voice prompt directly to operator responsible for water complaints

Our staff then resorted to the National Department of Water and Sanitation Covid-19 Hotline 0800-200200. Response time was still a frustration, but once contact was made, the staff were very well informed in routing requests directly to assigned municipal water, sanitation and housing staff on the ground. We had direct access to e-mail our reports to eThekweni Metro.

Then began the hard task of monitoring. We had some indication of what to expect from high level reports shared at the Informal Settlement Task Team. A report from the Department of Water and Sanitation dated 24 April indicated that Rand Water had procured 50 new water tankers for uMgungundlovu District (uMDM), which were “delivered and in operation.” Throughout the monitoring period, there was very little evidence of more tankers on the road, and one had to ask how Rand Water in Gauteng could distribute vehicles and receive reports back from the local Water Services Authority that they were “operational” within 4 weeks of hard lockdown. There were massive logistical challenges in delivering emergency services during hard lockdown. It was widely reported that the Department had commandeered all available supplies of water storage tanks, but could not access building materials in order to mount them on plinths.



One of the enduring frustrations was not knowing whether our reports were being acted on – other than by monitoring in the field – and then whether it was a result of our or someone else’s efforts. In one instance, the Mkondeni Sacca settlement in Msunduzi observed a 200% increase in standpipe provision during April – from 2 to 6 standpipes for 1,500 households was hardly a significant improvement. When we reported the same, we were informed that work was procured in response to a “request from our structures.” At the time of preparing this report, on 26 November, the Sacca community had barricaded the main arterial road from Pietermaritzburg to Ashburton with burning tyres, protesting at the lack of services and housing.

SUMMARY OUTCOMES

At 3 months:

In eThekweni Metro, a programme of Communal Ablution Blocks had been rolled out as its main strategy for providing interim basic services. The majority were reported to be closed for repairs, although water could still be accessed from external taps. An appeal to the National Task Team to permit the use of Municipal Infrastructure Grant to undertake bulk repairs was disallowed. While there are understandable pressures on the municipality's operating budget, the Department's response was that it was simply a question of prioritisation of expenditure. A few sub-sections within the three settlement areas received supplementary standpipes and chemical toilets but the levels of basic services were still inadequate and access to sanitation was a major problem, with people resorting to the bush.

In Msunduzi, there was a very haphazard response. As previously noted, 4 additional standpipes were provided for a community of 1,500 households in Mkondeni Sacca. In Mkondeni and Denmark, Slangspruit, some VIPs were emptied after years of neglect, but the programme was very limited in its reach and effect. Ezinketheni, who had been reporting low water pressure to their two water stations due to leaks, saw two more tanks delivered to site.

In eNdumeni, the uMzinyathi Water Services Authority provided one additional standpipe to the Dlamini settlement; and additional water storage tanks backed up by a weekly tanker service to 5 of 19 farms underlying Hlaleleni. One of the community monitors visited the WSA depot and observed a number of water storage tanks in storage.

In uMngeni Municipality, the Shiyabazali settlement has been receiving daily tanker deliveries from uMDM but they were insufficient to service the whole population. Many residents continue to draw water from the top of Howick Falls. 4 additional water tankers were dispatched to service Wards 8, 9, 10 and 11 which have a chronic challenge with no bulk water supply.



Women and children are the most affected by water shortages as they do all the collecting.

In Newcastle, Site P46 saw an increase in standpipes from 1 to 4 serving a population of 280 households. This was the largest single improvement noted during the first 3 months.

The Nkanini community in Eshowe (uMlalazi LM) reported an increase in water tanker supply to their storage tanks, but still insufficient for a population of 1,400 households. 4 sections have no water supply at all and 300 households have no toilet facilities.

The Mkholombe community in Port Shepstone (Ray Nkonyeni LM) have 3 standpipes serving a population of 1,400 households. There was no improvement.

In the majority of target areas outside eThekweni, the largest single problem is the lack of adequate sanitation. Most communities rely on self-built pit latrines that are shared by as many as 10 households, making it impossible to practice personal hygiene. Even where VIPs or chemical toilets have been provided by the municipality, as in Bhambayi and Denmark, they were not being cleaned regularly.

At 6 months:



Repairs to Communal Ablution Blocks being checked in Bhambayi

In eThekweni Metro, a repair contract for the Foreman Road CABs that was reported to commence on 1 June failed to materialise. 3 additional standpipes and 3 chemical toilets were provided. Bhambayi was more fortunate with extensive repairs to their CABs, but they were reportedly broken again within days. This is referred to again under Conclusions and Way Forward. There was no further activity in the 6 settlements within Clairwood/Ward 32, which was the most difficult to monitor due to the settlements being relatively small and scattered and without any unified leadership.

In Msunduzi, there was hardly any service delivery once normal operations resumed. Only Ezinketheni saw the construction of 79 VIPs in a population of 1,500 households.

In eNdumeni, water service to the 19 farms improved. The majority of farms now had two water storage tanks serviced by weekly tanker deliveries. There was no further improvement in Dlamini settlement.

There were no reported changes in service delivery in any of the other areas being monitored.

CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

We anticipated there would be challenges with the rolling out emergency services during hard lockdown. They were significant, and saw little improvement once the country reverted to Level 3. Communication flows up and down the Command Centre chain were almost non-existent, as was feedback from the call centres that were operational. Some call centres remained closed even for emergency calls. Co-ordinators at provincial and local level were inaccessible.

In terms of hard service delivery, the most striking finding was that the failure to deliver lifeline (interim basic) services to informal settlements over the past 10 years was not going to be turned around under emergency conditions. It simply exposed, more acutely, the fault lines in service delivery – from the absence of any minimum standards, through to the procurement and delivery process. It was largely a haphazard response to a systemic challenge. Water resources were marginally improved in around half the settlements, while the provision and maintenance of sanitation is a human rights tragedy of proportion. In the majority of target areas outside eThekweni, most communities rely on self-built pit latrines that are shared by as many as 10 households, making it impossible to practice personal hygiene. Even where VIPs or chemical toilets have been provided by the municipality, as in Denmark, they were not being cleaned regularly.

The interim findings were shared in the National Covid-19 Informal Settlements Task Team, and the absence of minimum norms and standards ran into conflict with the need to manage informal settlement upgrading “incrementally” and with some flexibility. The biggest obstacle to resolving this conflict is the dominant view that it is ONLY about water and sanitation, and that communities are passive recipients of government services. Community engagement is core to the successful implementation of upgrading and sustainable maintenance of services. Sections of a community where there is no road access can be opened up by super-blocking and re-blocking and relocating selective households – all of which involves negotiation. Identifying “dry spots” where there are

frequent shortages – due to insufficient water stations or tanker deliveries – requires a process of consultation and fact-finding.

To this end, of the 14 communities in this study, we have identified 6 for further support, where the monitoring period was either too short or limited by restrictions on movement:

- Foreman Road – repair of CABs, additional chemical toilets.
- Bhambayi – repair of CABs, additional chemical toilets.
- Shiyabazali – potential reblocking to the western section along the Umgeni River valley to allow access to water tanker, new water station.
- Nkanini – improved road access to 2 remote sections, frequency of tanker delivery.
- Hlaleleni -- frequency of tanker delivery, chemical toilets for 300 households without sanitation.
- Mkhholombe – broader distribution of standpipes/water stations, provision of toilets.

In order to determine the adequacy of water service, we referred to the Water Services Act regulations (*GN 22355 of 8 June 2001*), viz.:

- *a minimum amount of 25 litres per person per day or 6 000 litres (6 kilolitres) per household per month (a household is defined as everyone living on one stand)*. This is unlikely to be achieved, but the critical dimension is to ensure regular supply to all households.
- *at a minimum flow rate of not less than 10 litres per minute*. This is also unlikely to be achieved, due to a combination of bulk supply, informal connections, and leaks. There are interim measures that can be introduced, such as having more water stations that can fill during periods of low demand.
- *within 200 metres of a household*. This is a critical dimension for anyone who has had to carry water for any distance. It can be mitigated by having more than a single point of entry and re-blocking within the settlement.

The Department of Human Settlements' Emergency Assistance Programme provides for 1 toilet per 5 households. This is patently unrealistic given the density of most settlements – re-blocking to that extent would be a massive disruption of existing settlement patterns. However, given the widespread neglect of both the provision and regular servicing of on-site sanitation, there is an imperative to undertake more detailed studies per settlement to establish how sanitation can be drastically improved.

Copies of this report will be distributed via the National Covid-19 Informal Settlement Task Team, to all the relevant municipalities and Water Service Authorities, and the affected communities who will continue the struggle to access basic services.

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