SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

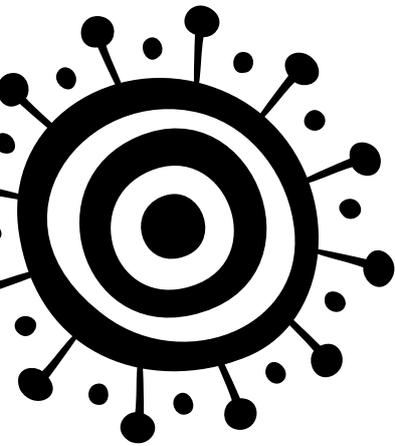**ESWATINI HUB**

WHOSE Crisis?

The global COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of communities in Eswatini: Policy Brief

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief presents the findings of the Whose Crisis? research project which aimed to document the lived experiences of vulnerable communities during the COVID-19 pandemic in sub–Saharan Africa. The brief focuses on the impact of pandemic restrictions on communities in Eswatini drawing key messages from the research to inform future emergency responses. Research findings demonstrate that COVID-19 restrictions had severe impacts on lives and livelihoods, ultimately leading to feelings of resentment, neglect, hopelessness, and anger. Crises interventions must be adapted to local capacities and context.

BACKGROUND

The Whose Crisis? project aimed to explore the public health impacts of COVID-19 as well as the socioeconomic effects of pandemic-related responses. The Eswatini Research Hub worked with the other participating countries to deliver a multidisciplinary research project utilizing participatory arts-based methods to gather data on the lived experiences of local residents. The research sites in Eswatini were Kwaluseni (Manzini Region), Vuvulane (Lubombo Region), and Mbabane area (Hhohho region).
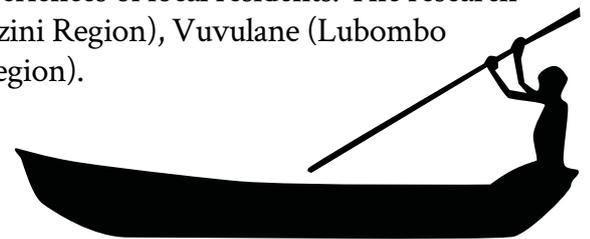
COVID-19 INTERVENTIONS

Eswatini was largely shielded from the virus until the end of 2020, when the pandemic took hold and quickly overwhelmed local hospitals and health providers. The government, like most in the region, took immediate steps in March/April 2020 to implement national lockdowns and social distancing measures including school closures and restrictions to public events, gatherings, cross-border travel, and non-essential activities. Though the level of restrictions would vary, border closures and social distancing measures remained in place for over one and a half years. The strict public health measures were coupled with ongoing sensitization and awareness raising campaigns through channels such as newspapers, radio, television, and community visits.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The awareness-raising conducted in Eswatini, by public and private actors, was impressive in its clarity and reach across the country. Most people complied with covid related rules especially after the first and second deadly waves in 2021. As time went on, however, there was growing fatigue among the population as isolation and the social and economic impacts of restrictions took a heavy toll on vulnerable communities.

Faith in the pandemic response was also undermined by stories of corruption, excessive police force and lack of clear leadership. There was concern that interventions were merely being copied from other countries especially South Africa. The situation was further exacerbated by national unrest in mid-2021, involving disenfranchised students and youth, which caused an unprecedented national security situation in the country, further impacting school openings, freedom of movement and the general social fabric.

> *"Many community residents felt that the negative socioeconomic impacts of restrictions were far worse than the impact of COVID-19 on their health."*

All communities reported loss of livelihood and income leading to a significant decline in their socioeconomic situation. Some assistance in the form of food and finance was provided by state and non-state actors however assistance was either one off or insufficient. Many households had to turn to churches or local NGOs for food assistance. The initial community buy in faded and in many cases transformed into resentment and disillusionment. The protracted school closures increased feelings of discontent among young people. Many community residents felt that the negative socioeconomic impacts of restrictions were far worse than the impact of COVID-19 on their health.

Public health interventions succeeded at providing reliable and timely information, but no action was taken to address the adverse impact of restrictions on vulnerable livelihoods pushing people further into poverty and food insecurity. The country must ensure it is prepared for the next crisis through better planning, funding, and implementation of emergency responses. It is crucial to safeguard development gains that have taken years to achieve.

- Whilst national lockdowns might be possible in countries with greater financial capacities and social safety nets, in countries like Eswatini this approach has proved problematic. Public health interventions must be balanced against local capacity gaps and vulnerabilities such as precarious livelihoods and food insecurity.

- Emergency responses must involve local communities in the identification of local needs and strategies to address them. Social safety nets must be strengthened and expanded to protect vulnerable households against future shocks.

- It is imperative that we collectively learn from this disruptive episode in human history. Disaster responses and public health measures must ensure people are well looked after, that rights are not infringed upon, that the disenfranchised do not fall further into societal cracks, and that local and global inequalities do not grow.

KEY MESSAGES