

Chapter 21

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CAPE TOWN'S CRISIS-RIDDEN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

This contribution seeks to take a critical survey the responses of the City of Cape Town and social movements to the Covid-19 pandemic. The major hotspots for the virus have been in dense informal settlement areas with unreliable communal taps. The city provides additional emergency water services but this relief will be withdrawn once the virus subsides, with the city's main preoccupation being the maintainance of its revenue base. Mass unemployment in a vulnerable tourist-led economy is likely to deepen inequality, fuel already disruptive protests about essential services, and spark more land invasions. Organized resistance requires linking workers who provide services with people's committees and the unemployed, working towards a solidarity economy.

INTRODUCTION

In early July 2020, a video of a naked man, Bulelani Qolani, being hauled out of his home by Cape Town's Anti-Land Invasion Unit went viral. When asked why the City of Cape Town (CCT) was evicting people despite a moratorium on evictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, Mayor Dan Plato repeated his previous response: "These are not evictions but anti-land invasion operations."

Cape Town's housing crisis is “manufactured” in the sense that vast amounts of under-utilized, fully serviced houses in low-density, well-located (mainly white) areas are often held as speculative assets. Meanwhile, the majority of citizens – the poor – are packed into dense informal housing settlements and townships on the periphery. Many have been forced to “invade” unused land to build shelter.

Regarded as the wealthiest city in Africa, Cape Town is also amongst the most unequal, racist and unevenly developed of cities in the world (McDonald 2008, Lemanski 2007, Turok 2001, World Bank 2018). Under the African National Congress (ANC) and the centre-left Democratic Alliance (DA), it has become a paradigmatic neoliberal city.

This chapter uses water as lens to look at how Cape Town's racial and spatial inequalities graphically reveal the incompleteness of the ANC's social and national revolutions in South Africa, arguing that the Covid-19 crisis and responses to it are best understood by looking at the existing faultlines in the space-economy and the priorities of the ruling elite.

CAPE TOWN AS EPICENTRE

Cape Town was the first city to become an epicentre of the pandemic in Africa, with 60% of the South African cases from March to June of 2020. Introduced by foreign tourists, the virus soon spread to workers and then to black townships, where in the worst cases, 1 out of 50 people were infected. According to Dr. Mnguni, head of internal medicine at Khayelitsha District Hospital in Cape Town, by July the virus was “spreading like wildfire” (BBC 2020).

The healthcare system in South Africa remains separated between a world-class private system for a minority who can afford private medical insurance while the mostly black population use an overburdened public system. These inequalities will have dire consequences during the pandemic. The private healthcare provider

Netcare estimates that more than half of the country's 6000 critical care beds are in private hospitals.

Compounding the crisis, South Africa also has the world's largest epidemic of HIV, making the population more susceptible to Covid-19 and other infections. According to 2019 figures, only two thirds of an estimated 7.7 million people living with HIV in South Africa were on anti-retroviral treatment.

With the number of Covid-19 cases in South Africa close to 500,000 by the end of July 2020 – more than half of Africa's total and the world's 7th highest number of cases – the country's cruel inequalities act a major accelerator of the virus and of death. As of July 2020, South Africa's infection rate is at 2100 per million people (compared, for example, to China's 60 per million people). Tellingly, the ANC government has refused to provide a breakdown of cases and deaths by race.

The health crisis is compounded by an economic crisis. Pre-pandemic, over 30% of South Africans were unemployed. Two weeks into the lockdown, a survey by the Human Sciences Research Council found that more than half (55%) of residents of informal settlements had no money to buy food, and the same was true for two thirds of township residents (News24 2020).

THE NATIONAL RESPONSE

The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs declared a national disaster on March 15, 2020, under the terms of the Disaster Management Act (2002) and imposed one of the harshest lockdowns in the world. Municipalities were directed to close all public facilities that do not provide essential services. Community gatherings, weddings and other celebrations were prohibited. Funerals were permitted to continue, but mourners were limited to close family members and restricted to 50 people. The state suspended the issuing of permits for marches, protests and the handover of petitions. Every person was confined to their place

of residence unless strictly for the purpose of performing essential services, obtaining essential goods or services, collecting social grants or pensions, or seeking medical attention. Movement between provinces and between metropolitan and district areas was prohibited, except for essential workers, transportation of cargo and mortal remains, or to attend funerals.

The government took a particularly heavy-handed approach to enforce the measures. The South African Police Services (SAPS) and National Defence Force used brutal measures to enforce the lockdown. There have been many complaints about people being assaulted and killed by the SAPS. By March 26, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate had already recorded 14 assaults, one rape and eight deaths as a result of SAPS action.

NGOs and many mainstream political parties also expressed concern that the one-size-fits-all approach made no sense for many segments of the population, particularly those in informal settlements and dense housing settlements, since the lockdown measures would destroy peoples' livelihoods. For example, many workers in the informal sector, such as waste pickers and street traders, lost their main source of income when their activities were banned and markets shut down.

The government announced two cash transfer measures in an attempt to prevent total collapse. First, in April 2020, the state announced that the unemployed would receive a grant of R350 per month from May until the end of October.¹ The grant is only open to applicants who are not beneficiaries of any other form of social security grant or Unemployment Insurance Fund payment and are not currently receiving other income. Second, the government increased social grants from R350 to R500 per month. About 42% of households in South Africa rely on social grants; it is the most important source of income after salaries (Eyewitness News 2019).

¹ 1 USD = 16 ZAR.

RESPONSE OF THE CITY OF CAPE TOWN

In March 2020, the CCT announced measures in compliance with national directives. During the early months of the pandemic, the city operated with only skeletal staff, responding to emergencies only. Personal protective equipment (PPE) provisioning was extremely tardy. As one worker put it during the June 4 meeting of the Water and Wastewater Portfolio Committee meeting, “the provision of PPE has improved since the start of the lockdown period but there had been challenges with regards to the supply... Currently, there is one cloth mask per person” (City of Cape Town 2020b).

Once “hotspots” emerged, the contracted healthcare workers went door-to-door, asking residents questions about Covid-19 symptoms. If residents answered yes to certain questions, they were referred for Covid-19 testing, either at a clinic or one of the mobile sites located throughout the city (City of Cape Town 2020a). Between 30 and 40 public sites were identified for quarantine and the setup of isolation facilities, but as of September 2020, the city was waiting for funding to be released.

Problems with autocratic decision-making have also emerged in the context of the emergency. At the end of March, city councillors agreed to go into recess, giving the mayor executive power. Craig Kesson (Director, Corporate Services) was appointed to head the Covid-19 response. According to Kesson, the recess “does not mean the councillors have not been active as they are involved on the ground and doing humanitarian work.” He further stressed, “The mayor is in a meeting about keeping the tourism industry afloat” (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2020a).

Municipal services

The CCT entreated its residents: “We continue to urge account holders to pay for services to ensure that the City continues to function to provide basic services; we have existing relief available in the

form of indigent relief for rates and services, however, all options are currently being explored. Our call centre remains open.”

In terms of basic municipal services, on March 25, 2020, the CCT suspended new water restrictions on debtors but continued to deduct arrears from electricity purchases – an established form of collateral punishment since it is illegal to completely discontinue water supply. In April, the Cape Town city council announced that commercial property owners may apply to make arrangements to pay off the rates over an agreed number of months. No interest will be charged, and debt management actions were taken for the duration of the arrangement. The same arrangements were made for households, and additional rates rebates were made available to pensioners and disabled property owners who have experienced a reduction in investment returns and household income due to Covid-19. The CCT also provided rates rebates and temporary payment arrangements to those who are unemployed. To allow for more residents to qualify for free services, the indigent threshold was raised to R7,000 income per month, and the rates discount for many in this category has been increased.

The city has also enabled a faster registration process for the indigent, disabled and pensioner rebates. Instead of the normal three-month assessment period, applicants will now be assessed based on just one month of income.

Budget priorities

On May 27, 2020, the City of Cape Town adopted its 2020-21 budget, totalling R54 billion. While there have been some provisions for the poor, certain budget choices reflect the toxic spatial politics of the DA administration. In the context of the pandemic, R12 million initially earmarked for community development initiatives was reprioritized for emergency food relief. Representing only 0.002% of the budget, this amount is nowhere near the amount needed in the context of the pandemic. Nor does it do anything to address the structural and systemic nature of food insecurity, which goes

beyond the question of hunger (Crush et al. 2018). It is revealing that in the same budget, the CCT allotted more money for Christmas lights in the wealthier (mostly white) tourist parts of the city. In addition, in the early months of the pandemic the CCT did not stop cleaning kelp off beaches, even though tourism came to a halt and the beaches were closed to the public.

Despite the obvious importance of water services to promote public health, the council decided to increase tariffs for water services an additional 4% even in the context of the pandemic. Water in Cape Town was already extremely expensive. Under the rising block tariff scheme the price of water increases the more one uses, punishing lower-middle-income residents with large households who consume more than the basic supply of 6 kilolitres (kL) per month. In 2018, the water bill for a lower-middle-income household using about 25 kL per month was R800. Although such cross-subsidization schemes can be progressive, in Cape Town the city “steals” from not-so-poor larger households to subsidize the ultra-poor, and in the process massively over-recovers on water bills (Daily Maverick 2019).

The municipal bureaucracy argued that Covid-19 has exacerbated an already difficult financial situation for the city. The city suffered major losses in revenue from water services when consumers were restricted during the drought of 2015-2017. Total water usage declined 45% from 900 million litres per day (MLD) in February 2017 to 500 MLD in February 2018. In order to shore up revenues in the context of reduced water sales, the city increased the price of water from an average of R18 to R32 per kilolitre, a staggering 80%. Because sanitation tariffs are based on the volume of water used, there have also been hefty adjustments to sanitation tariffs.

Informal Settlements

Approximately 25% of Cape Town’s residents live in shacks – semi-permanent areas that receive “emergency services” (communal taps, shared toilets, etc.) and are constantly under threat from

fires, floods and crime. As Overy (2013: 25) notes of investment in these areas, “there was a general perception by the City, and hence, municipal staff, of informal settlements as temporary, and therefore not worthy of long-term investment or high priority either in terms of planning or resources.”

City officials have repeatedly warned that informal settlements are located on illegal land in environmentally hazardous areas and therefore are regarded as unsuitable for service delivery beyond emergency services (News24 2016, Limberg 2019). But given that these informal settlement areas – with over 200,000 households – are at the greatest risk from Covid-19, the city had little choice but to increase the delivery of services during the pandemic. As an emergency measure, they announced that they would send 28 water trucks to communities in informal settlements that lack access to water.

At its meeting on August 6, 2020, the city’s Water and Waste-water Portfolio Committee summarized its additional response to Covid-19 (City of Cape Town 2020c) as follows:

- 307 additional tanks (2700 L in size) installed in underserved areas – filled daily by tanker trucks – to improve access to water
- More than 50 million litres supplied, which also includes direct supply from tanker trucks in some areas
- Additional chemical toilets provided to all
- Increased janitorial services

There have been other attempts to address the compounding housing and related services crises in the context of the pandemic. The Endlovini area in the township of Khayelitsha is home to an estimated 20,000 people who share 380 communal toilets (about 53 people per toilet). In some instances, people have to walk up to 200 meters to their toilet. As an approach to de-densification, the city has confirmed its commitment to 6500 new housing opportunities at an estimated cost of R500 million (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2020a). In April, the city council shifted funds within

directorates as part of its Covid-19 mitigation plan (Daily Maverick 2020b), promising to:

- Invest R63-million in providing water in informal settlements;
- Install 93 water tanks in informal settlements;
- Spend R122 million for enhanced cleaning at homeless shelters and informal settlements, including deep-cleaning communal areas in informal settlements, which will be done five times a week by city staff and contractors.

GRASSROOTS AND LEFT RESPONSES

The key civil society players during the Covid-19 crisis have been the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), C19 People's Coalition, Cry of the Xcluded, and other social movements. The main dilemmas in South Africa relate to the failure to make organizational links and connect the movements in a broader program. Many black South Africans still hope that the ANC will pull the country out of the morass, while the stable black middle class (teachers, medical professionals and police who have private medical aid) have largely abandoned the black townships and “whitened” themselves. As SAFTU puts it:

The political elites and the ruling class do not care. They are more likely to survive even when infected. But thousands of the poorest people who have all manner of underlying health problems including tuberculosis and HIV and AIDS and weak immune systems will become the victims of the coronavirus. The children of the black working class families attend schools from a completely different world, where the kids are crammed into overcrowded classrooms in which social distancing is as impossible as in the overcrowded homes they come from.

SAFTU have threatened to mobilize for a nationwide stay-away and general strike as Covid-19 has turned into a class and race war.

In the context of the pandemic, the political support for the ruling DA administration in Cape Town appears to be weakening. The Gatvol CT (a local “coloured” nationalist movement) has emerged as a splinter group from the DA. Gatvol’s leader noted: “The City has invented a system that only caters for the elites and whites. And we are tired of it we want what has been promised to us” (IOL 2019).

Anti-privatization activists formed the Water Crisis Coalition (WCC), with the National Union of Metalworkers (Numsa), the biggest trade union in Africa, and SAFTU to mobilize poor and working-class Capetonians against the local government and offer solidarity to students. These organizations have been active in a recently formed national formation called the Covid-19 Crisis Coalition.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 crisis exposes both the manufactured nature of Cape Town’s problems such as the appalling unevenness and deep segregations of the city and how these are created by an economy that serves a narrow elite. It has also exposed greed and the disposability of black lives. The barbaric option of letting poor black lives “go” has been realized dramatically in the appalling facts of the large number of people dying of the disease and of hunger.

On June 1, 2020, national restrictions were lowered to level 3, but the country was still far from peaking. Most industrial and mining workers could return to work; schools gradually would reopen, and one third of university students could return for essential activities. By mid-August the government went down to level 2, claiming that the number of new Covid-19 cases was dropping. SAFTU issued a warning:

Unlike at the beginning of lockdown, government is no longer doing contact tracing nor using Community Healthcare

Workers to vigorously screen citizens. At the beginning of the campaign there was aggressive random testing. This is no longer happening.

The death toll from Covid-19 is likely to be three times higher than the official figure. While middle class professionals in comfortable home offices sing the praises of the “online revolution,” frontline workers are dying, and capital is using the crisis to its own advantage by restructuring work and normalizing precariousness. Meanwhile, the appetite of the mostly corrupt ANC and DA administrations for business opportunities has increased. The South African Revenue Service revealed in early September that 63% of companies awarded PPE-related contracts were not tax compliant, and most of these contracted companies were politically connected (SABC News 2020). There is always money to be made in a crisis.

The CCT has not seen the Covid-19 crisis as a time to rethink the architecture of the city and its manufactured “problems.” Its main concern is “business continuity,” centralizing power and financial survival of the state bureaucracy. The city is deeply worried about rising violent protests (hijacking, looting) and more than 260 incidents of alleged illegal land occupation between April and July’s lockdown (SABC News 2020).

It is likely the pressures on the working class and the poor will increase dramatically with IMF loan conditionalities, drastic cut-backs in the public service of around 300,000 employees, while more concessions will be offered to business to further depress the conditions of workers. Land “invasions,” food riots and protests are likely to increase. The South African Local Government Association (SALGA) has noted that once the Covid-19 crisis is over, it is likely that services such as water tanks could be discontinued due to the financial stress in municipalities (SALGA 2020).

Mass unemployment in a vulnerable tourist-led economy is likely to fuel already disruptive protests, and land invasions have escalated. Meanwhile, additional emergency services and food

parcels offering temporary relief are unlikely to be sustained after Covid-19. The city's main preoccupation is with its revenue base, and there has been an utter failure to rethink the structures of social reproduction.

Under these conditions, clawing back democracy and accountability and rethinking how we institutionalize new forms of spatial governance around housing, water, food production and distribution relations are crucial. Solving the spatial/housing issue, occupying the city, creating peoples' committees for food distribution, working towards a solidarity economy, and drawing the mass of unemployed into organized resistance are among the most urgent challenges facing a still-disorganized Left in South Africa.

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