**YMCA Resilience Covid-19 Response and Recovery**

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I want to thank World Alliance leadership for this honour to share and make a contribution to this event. It is a humbling moment to share this platform with a team of friends and leaders in our global movement, whom I so highly admire. I am also overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task of reflecting on a subject that is threatening to be one of the worst catastrophe’s in the modern age.

I want to start by pledging solidarity and prayers for all those brothers, sisters and nationalities that have been severely affected and impacted by Covid-19. Over the past few weeks I have witnessed prayers in our YMCA meetings; in our churches and functions, on your behalf. God is with us in this struggle for healing and deliverance.

I am here today speaking on the experience of South Africa YMCA, our Covid-19 Response and recovery, and also, in a limited way, carrying the African identity and flag.

I will share a few sentiments on action of African governments and leadership and their response; briefly about how our communities have been experiencing the Covid-19 crisis, and finally sharing the YMCA experience and response.

Firstly, we commend Africa Leaders for their responsible, decisive and coordinated response during this era of Covid-19 attack. They have acted swiftly with required urgency, taking all necessary steps, leaving nothing to chance as they seek to prevent what is threatening to be the worst catastrophe in the continent:

* clinically restricting international access between African countries to limit the increase of infections,

* boldly implementing carefully monitored lock downs and enforcing social distancing
* In addition, the governments have been uncompromising in their enforcement of these laws of lock-down and social distancing. In South Africa, prominent church ministers and members have been arrested for failure to comply to conditions of lockdown. Just yesterday the SA president suspended a government minister for contravening the lock-dawn laws with criminal charges being laid against her. This has sent a strong message that the state of emergency rules apply equally to everyone. Nobody will be excluded from the consequences of failing to abide by the regulations. South Africa is a quiet place today.
* We are also witnessing an unprecedented, healthy and robust collaboration between government, business, churches, non-government organisations and labour movements. This could produce positive outcomes in the post Covid-19 era.

**Realising the economic consequences of the lockdown on the poor, the SA government has introduced abnormal interventions in an effort to create economic shock absorbers for people**. These include good measures not common on a normal day, such as;

- creating easy access to social security and social grants to elderly pensioners, disabled people and single mothers.

- making provisions of food parcels to people who can not afford it.

**-** creating a Covid-19 Solidarity Fund, funded entirely by donations from the South African public and big business. This fund has already reached the R2 billion mark.

Such prompt action and others has contributed to the current figures that remain relatively low:

* Infections in Africa altogether amount to 11,310.
* Deaths all over Africa are just over 500 (actual 570 as at April 8)
* One of the highest countries being SA with 1845, and 15 deaths
* Egypt and Algeria have both recorded over 1500 infections while our neighbor, Mozambique is close to 1,300 \*

\*Source. WHO. Johns Hopkins

At first glance these statistics are encouragingly low. However, what we are now hearing from experts, is that what we have seen might be a calm before the storm**.**

There has been growing anxiety about the prospects of this disease in Africa. The fear is that no one knows how the virus is going to behave in Africa. We have been shocked and terrified, observing the experience and reality in the North, that is Europe; USA and China. The statistical increase of infections; people hospitalized; people dying in great numbers. This brutal and evasive Corona attack on Europe, Asia and USA, countries with relatively advanced health systems, has left us to contemplate what will happen when Covid-19 hits Africa, our worst fear being the impact a rampant Covid -19 will have on our rural areas and crowded, informal settlements.

A major concern is the obvious incapacity of health and emergency systems in our countries to fight this disease once it gains a foothold in our communities, particularly those of poor people. Our governments are concerned about the absence of health and care resources including capacity to process mass testing, which is already overdue. This challenge differs from country to country and from state to state. The picture worsens when you compare cities and urban areas versus rural areas and informal settlements.

**All these steps taken by governments to contain Covid-19, to prevent a worse case scenario, will pay off in the long term. However, the worst fear is how long will** our fragile economies be able to sustain these efforts and steps and how long will it take our economies to recover in the post coronavirus era. In South Africa, Covid-19 comes at the time when South Africa had already been reported to be on the eve of a recession. Worst economic consequences have been predicted with not less than 50% of unemployment predicted post Covid-19. While a few countries with better economies have promised a bail out of for business to stimulate growth, one wonders what the situation will be like for countries with weak economies.

**How are people and communities experiencing Covid-19**

1. **Within four days of lockdown it became clear that social distancing is difficult** to make a reality in poor communities. In many ways, proving to be an impossible ask.

While there is no option to the preventive measure of lock down and social distancing, it is unfortunate that this cannot apply to a small shack where 5 to 10 people live together. It is almost impossible to keep poor people in these shacks for more than 4 hours. The common trend has been that people in townships and poor communities as well informal settlements, have stayed in doors in the mornings and when law enforcement is out. By lunch time, people are walking and running around the streets, and the situation is scary.

1. **Lockdown is workable within affluent communities.** It is easily implementable as people are able to lock themselves in their homes with gardens. Affluent people can go to shops, buy food and stock up in refrigerators, but poor people cannot store perishable items. In many situations of the poor, police have found people wondering in the streets. When asked why are they not abiding by the rules, their simple answer is that they are hungry and looking for food.
2. **Lockdown has helped to restore value of family life** that has been lost in our communities, as people are forced to be together and this rebuild families.

However, this has not been the case in many families. The Covid-19 has worsened the gender violence situation which was already a social hazard in South Africa. Our Gender violence monitors have already made a special request to the minister concerned, for gender violence monitors to be exempted from lockdown, so that they can provide interventions within these tragic domestic situations.

**SA YMCA Response and Recovery**

1. Lockdown meant that 5 of our 7 largest local YMCAs have closed their main revenue generating centers, three of these as hostels; whilst booming fitness and sports centers that sustain almost all their programmes were forced to close these operations.
2. The initial reaction of some local YMCAs was self-pity, with the closure of their centres and programmes indicating a gloomy future. It soon became evident, in further consideration of the situation, that organisations often redeem themselves in times of crisis. The leadership of the SA YMCA made a deliberately decision, that as YMCA we must be ready to take advantage of the opportunities that this phase can present to organisations like the YMCA. This plays out well with those YMCAs that have already formed partnerships with government and other non-profits in the past. These partnerships are being solidified and respect between organisations and the YMCA is growing as they respond together in this crisis. I believe that the pro-active response of many YMCAs to Covid-19 will reshape our organisation in the post virus era.
3. Whilst many YMCAs are hurting financially, three of our YMCAs, leveraging their long standing relationships with local government, have already reached agreement with local government to partner with them;

- either in utilizing buildings for housing homeless people or
- being sites of quarantine and isolation, with generated income,
- other YMCAs are providing support services such as enhancing awareness around accurate information to dispel the massive misinformation that is being communicated in local communities who have less access to mainstream media.
4. At national level, Covid-19 as a crisis has forced us to innovate in many ways. As the YMCA we have found ourselves spending more time with our strategic partners than before, working on meaningful collaboration with government; churches; ecumenical organisations; and other non-government organisations.
5. We have partnered maybe for the first time with churches through a provincial ecumenical body in Kwazulu/Natal, which is the strongest provincial ecumenical organisation in the country. This has led to a major provincial partnership with government with action that includes;

- raising awareness
- promoting and building of patriotism and solidarity within people
- relief for vulnerable people during lockdown.

We are already jointly at an advanced stage of developing a major disaster response management activity which includes high care and relief as we anticipate the worst situation from Covid-19.
6. The Covid-19 as a crisis has forced us back to the world of our founder, George Williams. YMCA was found in a moment of crisis, which prompted innovation. It is in such times that innovation is generated, that God gives visions to respond to moments of our crisis. The spiritual requirement in such times is increased prayer, seeking discernment and wisdom about how to respond as YMCA. The question on everyone’s mind is “how do we re-invent ourselves in the light of the Covid-19 crisis”.