



science & innovation  
Department:  
Science and Innovation  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



A qualitative analysis of comments received from the general public in response to gazetted amendments to the Disaster Management Act Regulations: Alert level 3 (Gazette 43521 of 12 July 2020)

by

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)

*Report submitted to the Minister of COGTA, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma*

**The views expressed in this report are a summary of the comments expressed by the general public and do not represent the views of the wider South African public, the HSRC or the individuals in the research team**

# Key findings and overall sentiments: Reporting on feedback from the public

## 1. Introduction

The HSRC was requested to receive, on behalf of government, email responses from the general public to the gazetted amendments to the Disaster Management Act Regulations: Alert level 3 (Gazette 43521 of 12 July 2020) during Coronavirus COVID-19 as announced by the President on Sunday, 12 July 2020. The [comments@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:comments@hsrc.ac.za) email address received 636 emails by the 24<sup>th</sup> of July 2020. Two further emails were received subsequent to the analysis of the comments, which were not considered in this report. The emails received are not representative of the general population, and are qualitative in nature and were voluntarily sent mostly by individuals as opposed to organisations and groups. There were several duplicates and empty emails in the dataset. The researchers signed a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) to ensure confidentiality. Ethical approval was not sought from the HSRC ethics committee, as this was not a commissioned, formal research project.

## 2. Methodology

The HSRC team developed a framework for capturing individual emails. These were sorted by sector and collated into themes. Each email was captured in the framework spreadsheet and then analysed. Qualitative analyses were undertaken to identify themes and sentiments emerging from the data. Summaries were written for every 100 comments. These summaries were collated into a single document.

## 3. Summary of themes emergent in the data

As South Africa and the rest of the world are battling with the coronavirus pandemic, the implemented regulations to curb the spread of Covid-19 have elicited different reactions from the people of South Africa. While the regulations are meant to achieve balance between saving lives and saving the economy, the general tenor of the responses is one of frustration from citizens regarding the official approach of government to the pandemic. The bulk of the responses were to the lockdown regulations. While there was some support for government's strategy, most responses expressed dissatisfaction with what were perceived to be contradictions in the regulations. There are specific areas that evoke frustration and much attention, namely:

- Alcohol & tobacco ban
- The incapacitated health system,
- Travel and public transport,
- Mask wearing,
- COVID-19 relief funds,
- Ban on family visits,
- Racism, and
- Schools opening

The responses, as should be expected, sit on a continuum. They range from complete agreement with government actions on the one hand to strong opposition on the other hand. Those who are in favour of the government regulations in managing the COVID-19 pandemic hold the view that the escalating infections call for government either maintaining the current measures or even revert to a hard lockdown - Level 5. Loss of livelihoods underpinned much of the opposition. Evident in the emails was a cross cutting concern with the impact of the lockdown on the economy.

It is important to draw attention to a significant constant in the responses. Both those who are in favour of government's approach and those who are against it are adamant that there should be much clearer and stricter oversight of the basic safety regulations that should be in place. There was an emphasis on the need for government to regulate that both private and state firms strictly adhere to regulations. For example, the cases of government entities, ESKOM and the Correctional Services Department, failing to adhere to basic regulations such as the wearing of masks and social distancing were noted as a serious cause of concern where the state failed to practice what it was preaching. There was also concern about the inconsistent and variable application of the regulations and a persistent request that the simple application of law and order, such as punishing drunken-driving more assiduously, gender-based violence, would go a long way in steering public behaviour towards more socially appropriate forms of behaviour.

The majority of the comments were about the alcohol and tobacco ban. The general sense emanating from the emails was that the restrictions were not beneficial to the public but, that they, instead, stimulated and provoked frustration, despair and despair which, in some instances, led to criminal behaviour. There was also general dissatisfaction with the fact that the prohibitions treated everyone the same. Some responses said that law-abiding citizens should not be "punished" for the bad and irresponsible behaviour of some. For example, one commenter suggested that the government should "concentrate efforts on punishing those who abuse alcohol and not responsible alcohol users".

Some comments related to specific sectors and made specific recommendations, whilst others cut across more than one sector, and therefore could not be assigned to a sector because they were general. Some comments also did not make specific constructive feedback but expressed frustration with the government and the regulations as a response to COVID -19. There were also responses that indicated support for some measures and unhappiness with others. These were difficult to categorise neatly.

### 3.1 Frustrations with alcohol and tobacco ban

The alcohol and tobacco ban stimulated severe criticism. Much of this criticism takes the view that the arguments and motivation behind the bans is not supported by science. The NCCC has highlighted health issues, particularly those related to respiratory factors, as the reason behind the tobacco ban. Alcohol sales resumed under level 3 of the lockdown but were again suspended after the outcry of trauma units in the health centers being overwhelmed. Concern was expressed that alcohol was largely responsible for trauma related cases, which added a strain to the already vulnerable health system. The primary concern highlighted by the comments is the negative impact the ban will have on the economy and livelihoods of the people represented by the entire value chain of the alcohol industry, from farmers, to brewers, distillers, retailers, restaurants, taverns and liquor traders. The view was expressed that the revenue loss would be huge and hard to bear for the country and that this would affect other streams of income such as the media and advertising, transportation and manufacturing. Mention was made about the already prevalent surge of the illicit trade of tobacco with smokers opting to acquire cigarettes illegally which come at very high cost and are readily available and that the net effect does not equate to a reduction in the number of smokers. There is also reference made to the harmful effects of illegal cigarettes on the health of those desperate for it. This regulation is said to encourage illegal activity and results in a loss of tax.

Some responses described the bans as an infringement on their right to choose whether to smoke or not, and one member mentioned smoking as a coping mechanism for dealing with stress and mental illness. There were also, it should be noted, expressions of support for the continued ban on sale of tobacco products.

*Please let us have cigarettes. My friend is mentally ill and she smokes and she is harming herself due to stress and needing to visualize pain. It's heart breaking. The country needs the tax money badly. Don't rob everyone over something that doesn't fill up hospitals. (Female, member of the public)*

The alcohol ban featured most prominently in the analysed emails. Linked to it is the ban of tobacco products and how the loss of these stimulants impacts not only the economy but also mental health. The bulk of the emails carried negative views, even those imploring government to assist. Others outrightly condemned government for mismanagement of public funds and corruption and not having people's best interests at heart. Some responses were polarised, and emails noted that the effects of tobacco were less harmful than the impact of alcohol, so they welcomed the ban of alcohol sales. Notable too was the view that there were many more harmful practices than smoking and drinking.

An interesting critique from obviously quite different sources, reflected particularly in people's names, whether they were English, Afrikaans or one of the vernacular languages, was of government taking away people's basic freedoms and beginning to take authoritarian and even despotic actions against the South African public. Furthermore, the actions of the minority are noted to have led to the majority having to do without alcohol and to a lesser extent cigarettes or tobacco products.

The most common sentiment in these sectors was the call to lift the bans on alcohol and tobacco. A majority of those who commented on the tobacco and alcohol ban believed that they should be lifted because they caused more harm than good and that they infringed on the rights of smokers and drinkers. The general view is that there is no evidence to suggest a correlation between tobacco and COVID infections. The following were some of the most common reasons supplied for the ban

### 3.2 Healthcare system failure

There is a general emphasis that the bad state of the health sector cannot be blamed on alcohol and tobacco as this has been largely caused by the failure of the state. The maladministration and corruption-plagued governance is both a historic and political problem. The emergence of the pandemic is exposing such incompetence and there is fear of a near collapse of the health system in South Africa.

### 3.3 Travel/ Taxis

While there was an acknowledgement and a liking of government actions broadly, there was a view that the state lacked a willingness to tackle some hard questions. Most notable in this space were the taxi industry and the teachers' unions. The public transport concern, mainly about the taxi industry and its inability to guarantee people's safety, has been one of the areas regarding compliance with the regulations. The taxi industry has been at odds with the government for a while and the emergence of COVID-19 made things worse. The taxi owners rejected the social relief fund put forward by the government for the industry and embarked on a strike and threatened to bring the country to a standstill. They also threatened to load 100% capacity. The president later announced that the taxis would be allowed to load full capacity for local travel and 70% for long distance. This stance has been hugely criticized as it is perceived as government granting special treatment to the industry. There was also a view that government actions were incoherent. For instance, allowing taxi to load to full capacity but outlawing the same in family cars that mostly carry a maximum of five passengers was referred as being 'ridiculous.' In addition, the banning of families from visiting each other when people could use public transport to go to and from work was considered extreme and ill conceived. Such inconsistencies were attributed to 'weak leadership' with reference to the President. There was particularly strong sentiment suggesting that the government feared the taxis industry which unilaterally adjusted the number of passengers boarding each taxi in many urban areas and the

government merely rubber-stamping this action. This led to a call for government to ensure that there was a broad and countrywide strict enforcement of regulations i.e. the wearing of masks and social distancing without exceptions.

Concerns were raised about learners infecting teachers and domestic workers affected on their way to work. Comments and queries were further layered with far reaching impacts of overloaded taxis. A taxi commuter expressed the view that she feared for her life because of overloaded taxis. The practical improbability of passengers keeping windows open to allow for proper ventilation and that no hand sanitizers were provided upon boarding was also raised. Many commented that it was not mandatory to wear a mask in boarding a taxi. One email raised considerations for the driver of the taxi who would be most at risk even for multiple short distance trips.

The fact that taxis are allowed to operate at full capacity, people can visit in public places like restaurants and casinos, but not in homes or at the beach was cause for concern. People thought that these regulations do not make sense. Similarly, the curfew is from 9pm till 4am where a member of the public asserts that people would in any case be mostly at home and not spreading the virus during that time; but they are allowed in various public places during the day.

Concerns around inter-provincial travel included the impact on families where spouses lived and worked in different provinces, and consequently could not be together or travel to see each other during the lockdown period. In relation to business travel, one member of the public urged government to think more creatively around opening up air travel for business, which was an important step in allowing more economic activity, similarly a member who worked on board ships requested that they be allowed to leave the country and start working again.

*It makes no sense that the president would allow taxis to operate at full capacity while they have increased prices. What happened to social distancing? (Male, member of the public)*

*I'm a married father of four kids. I stay in Mpumalanga where I work and my home is in Limpopo where my family is permanently based. Since the start of a lockdown on the 26th March I visited my family only twice because I couldn't find a relevant permit to visit the family. (Male, member of the public)*

*We need to be creative as we try and balance the scales between the spreading Of COVID-19, and getting the economy running as soon as possible with the least risk. We can open up business travel for domestic and international transit. I propose we use rapid test kits that detect the virus in 10 - 15minutes. The price of which can be included in the price of the ticket. (Male, member of the public)*

There was a general feeling that the taxi industry was being treated preferentially over other industries. Commenters were generally unhappy about the 100% taxi capacity and felt that public transport users were put at risk of infection. There was, therefore, recommendations to revisit the 100% capacity regulation in order to protect the passengers.

### 3.4 Schools

While there was anxiety amongst some of the respondents about the loss of learning time and the danger that the academic year would need to be abandoned, most responses sought schools to be shut down until the infection peak had been reached.

### 3.5 COVID-relief funds

Other points of interest included concerns about UIF application backlogs, the development of options for individuals who did not qualify for SASSA COVID relief funds nor UIF and how others still might access Retirement Annuities early.

Members of the public raised matters of difficulties accessing the government relief funds. The plight of people going hungry, losing or at risk of losing their jobs and their homes due to less work during lockdown were also key concerns.

*I applied for the relief fund for many times and got no response from the department.  
(Male, member of the public)*

One member raised concern over the stress of losing jobs or the threat of losing jobs as a cause for people to commit suicide.

### 3.6 Racism

Implicit and explicit expressions of racism were evident in some of the emails. Many who were critical of the argument also used the opportunity to make comments about black incompetence. The insinuation that corruption was a black attribute was evident in a few emails. Micro aggressions and aversive racism –“all lives matter “, “we know who the culprits are...put townships under level 5”, “playing the race card” were noted in a few emails. A few emails suggested that lockdown was a communist plot.

### 3.7 Fake news/social media

A small number of emails questioned the legitimacy and validity of the science behind government’s strategy. A query related to the legitimacy of information on masks on social media and which sources to trust. In another email (unrelated to masks) an individual requested that a social media post be reviewed that “confirms” the virus is a scam. This perhaps indicates that more warnings about the fake news in circulation should be issued.

### 3.8 Wearing of masks

The wearing of masks was addressed by individual respondents in different ways. One referred to his underlying condition (asthma) making it impossible to wear a mask and another to his eczema which also meant that he/she could not have material touching his/her face . Other physical discomforts such as eyes tearing, difficulty breathing, eating etc. were noted. One particular individual feared arrest for not wearing a mask upon his return to work. Issues concerning wearing of masks were related to use within taxis, concerns over homeless people not having masks or wearing dirty masks, and a concern about the public wearing medical masks. The latter issue was raised as a concern by a health care worker, who highlighted matters of where the public discarded used masks as these were supposed to be discarded as health care risk waste. Secondly, the concern that supply might dwindle as health care workers now share supply with the public. A call was made for government to regulate the wearing of medical masks only within health care facilities.

*There might be a time where health workers will not be able to get these masks as we share them with public. My plea is that it is not possible for the government to say no one is allowed outside health facilities to be seen wearing these types of masks but instead to wear cloth mask... (Female, member of the public)*

Members of the public praised the President for emphasising wearing of cloth masks and importantly that it should cover both nose and mouth. The wearing of Perspex masks was criticized for being useless. One member suggested that bus and taxi operators, as well as spaza shop owners should be

fined for allowing people on board their vehicles or in their shops without masks. The responsible individual should also be fined.

One person appealed to the government to provide masks in the same way condoms were provided. This could perhaps allude to confidence in the lessons learned for South Africa's fight against HIV/AIDS.

### 3.9 Ban on family visits

The ban on family visits had a multi-faceted response and was mockingly compared to the taxi situation and the easing of restriction, which allowed casinos, restaurants and other social spaces to be re-opened. Families being able to gather in public establishments but not at home was questioned.

Participants generally expressed dissatisfaction about the ban on family visits. Some of them indicated that the ban was unjustifiable because the public was already exercising social distancing generally and there was no reason where they could not have social family visits. Some saw this ban as having the potential to break up families.

Members of the public mentioned that there is a need for families to see each other for support and renewed hope, rather than be continually isolated from such support. People would rather work and face the risk of infection than to not work and see family members go to bed hungry.

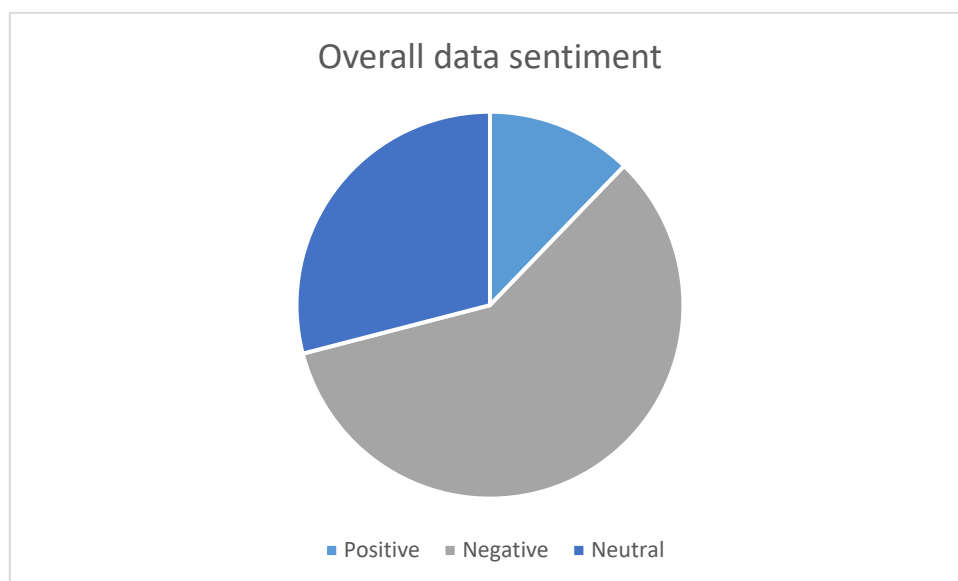
An appeal for easing of restrictions on camping and access to beaches was described as a way of coping.

Individual responses collectively point to the psychological impacts of being restricted and how the inconsistency may cause people to rebel. Coupled to this is the reliance of some of the respondents to cope with the general stresses of life with alcohol and tobacco products.

An interesting dimension was added with a query regarding permission for the cultural practice of animal slaughtering and whether an explicit restriction exists in that regard.

## 4. Overall sentiments

While sentiments in the sample of comments reviewed ranged from complete support to overwhelming rejection of government's strategy, this exercise has generated more negative responses.



The negative views, it must be clarified, are of both unhappiness with the easing of the lockdown and of its continuation. Where people are in support of government, they also seek stronger government commitment to and application of lockdown regulations. Their argument is that their safety is now the paramount issue in the situation in which the country finds itself. They argue that economic sustainability is secondary to making people live safer lives. Those responses, however, of the negative ones, are in the minority. The majority of the negative views are of the damaging effects to people's livelihoods. They want the lockdown to be eased so that the economy can improve.

Negative sentiments include that South Africans have started to lose trust in the government to effectively manage the pandemic. Some of these sentiments include feeling disappointed, sad, angry, overlooked or unimportant. Members of the public also feel that some regulations do not make logical sense, regulations are not consistently applied, while some feel that government want to control them. The following quotation captures much of the sentiments raised by members of the public:

*South Africans no longer trust the government. I know this is new territory but all this constant rules and flip-flopping on rules makes you look incompetent. Right now South Africans are more scared of being murdered, raped and losing their job than the virus and the long-term effects this lockdown will bring... We are all scared but the people are becoming more scared of the government and the collapse of everything they know, than the virus... Focus on areas with high infections rather than national rules. These were all things you said you would do but still haven't. (Female, member of the public)*

In addition, one member offered the sentiment that economic considerations appear to be the primary concern and health considerations secondary when it comes to government decision-making:

*The President stated that there is evidence that the Virus is air borne however we continue to allow people to eat in restaurants without their masks. This would lead any reasonable person to believe that the risk of transmission is tolerable if there's an economic benefit of sorts. In addition to this, the fact taxis were able to strong arm the NCCC into folding to their (unsafe) demands shows an instance when the economics were prioritized over health guidelines of social distancing. (Female, member of the public)*

Positive sentiments are centred around support for the re-banning of alcohol sales and in so doing protecting health care personnel and importantly, preserving hospital beds for COVID-19 patients:

*Very well done for re-introducing the alcohol ban and the curfew. If people could see what our Doctor daughter is seeing every day with the admissions at a Johannesburg state hospital, they would agree that the alcohol ban should never have been lifted in the first place. We are drinkers ourselves but fully support the need for these new regulations and it is the duty of all South Africans to accept this small sacrifice for the greater good of protecting beds, protecting healthcare workers and ultimately protecting lives. (Male, member of the public)*

*I fully support the Regulations. And it will be appropriate if the public can have where we can be whistle blowers to report those who sell alcohol illegally during this period. (Female, member of the public)*

Some recommendations were made which include: lifting the ban on cigarettes temporarily until any negative consequences become apparent; increasing the tax on the sale of cigarettes; implementing



a curfew and stricter sale times for the sale of alcohol; appointing properly qualified people to deal with gender-based crimes; stricter controls at the borders of provinces; improving processes for application for interprovincial travel; and keeping schools closed until September.

Additionally, Government should supply sanitizers to taxi operators and visit taxi ranks to check whether measures are applied; close schools during winter months and peak COVID-19; fine people for not wearing masks in public transport; one suggestion was for roadblocks to be set up as well as general enforcement of the regulations. The perpetrators should be punished, according to some comments, and not the general public. Pregnant women need to be included in measures to protect employees with compromised immune systems. Consider having a working week from Monday to Thursday and hard lock down from Friday to Sunday where you can only leave home for essential items. This can help curb the virus and take pressure of hospitals as contact will be less. Increase the taxes on alcohol and cigarettes call it a COVID-19 tax and use that money for more field hospitals and medical care.

It was also recommended that people are allowed to engage in cleansing rituals for one month after a death; removing the regulations prohibiting cleansing rituals; keeping the economy going including the bottle stores and punish only those that do not adhere to the rules and regulations of the lockdown; limiting the amount of alcohol purchased on a weekly basis, per household; grade 8,9,10,11 and 12 having their own day to go to school to decrease the number of learners on the school premises; the use of full plastic visors in situations where social distancing is not possible; preferably develop online teaching methods for schools; online sale of alcohol and cigarettes; hold those accountable for not adhering to lockdown regulations; and changing working hours during the cold season so that work begins at 9 or 10am.

Issues such as the constitutionality of the regulations, consultations, power struggles among government leaders and perceived isolation of certain industries such as tourism do appear as areas of concern. The overall feedback is that citizens are not happy with regulations, more especially around alcohol/tobacco ban and the inconsistencies on regulations make matters worse. Generally, some citizens feel like decisions are taken for them, not with them.

---

#### Research Team

Prof Priscilla Reddy

Prof Crain Soudien

Ms Yolande Shean

Dr Vuyo Mjimba

Dr Thelma Oppelt

Dr Lorenza Fluks

Ms Mmakotsedi Magampa

Dr Greg Houston

Mr Malwande Ntlangula

Ms Samantha Coert

Ms Konosoang Sobang