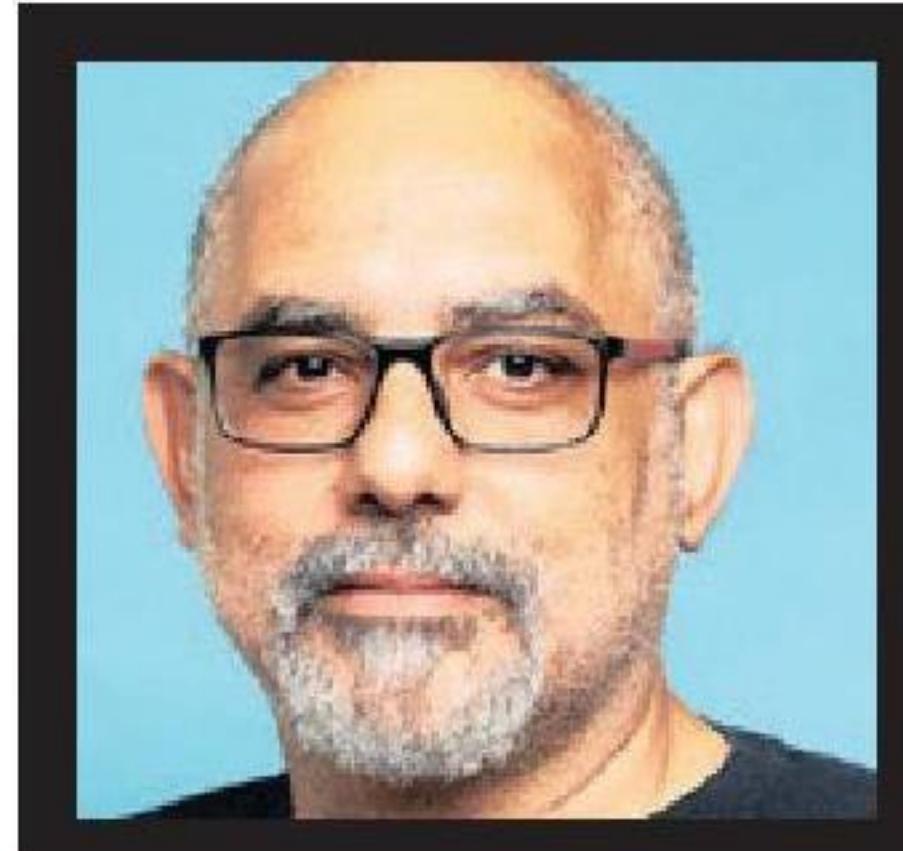


Coronavirus underlines health inequalities in society

Covid-19 will hit poor hardest amid already high levels of malnutrition, TB and HIV

COMMENT



BOBBY PEEK

AS WITH the climate crisis, the coronavirus marks out the connections and disconnections of our profoundly unequal society.

It arrived in South Africa with middle class travellers but it will not be confined to the richer classes. About 60% of South Africans are poor, according to official statistics, and they carry a very high burden of disease starting with malnutrition, HIV and TB.

People's health is also compromised by high levels of pollution in the environmental sacrifice zones where our electricity is generated, our fuel is refined and minerals are mined and smelted. And while the richer minority have access to high quality health care, poor people do not.

They rely on a public health system that is weakest where the need is greatest. Ironically, more government money goes into the private health system that serves the minority than into the public health system that has been subject to austerity budgeting for over two decades.

The coronavirus has disrupted profoundly interconnected and fragile global systems.

However, this gives us an opportunity to make our world more equitable and to test our just transition to a society with decent jobs for all, universal healthcare, and energy systems that benefit people and the biosphere.

We have to change systems that place profit over health and well-being. We have to recognise and address the political, social and economic factors that govern how health or illnesses move through our communities. For example, many people living in informal settlements have no access to



A HOMELESS woman puts her baby to sleep as they queue to be checked by health officials before heading to shelters in Durban during the nationwide lockdown to contain the coronavirus outbreak. | ROGAN WARD | Reuters

running water, making frequent hand washing very difficult, and crowded living conditions make social distancing almost impossible.

In 2007, the groundWork Report warned that economic depression provided the best hope for a credible reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. It was observed that this was the ultimate expression of unsustainable development accompanied by environmental injustice.

This was borne out in the 2008 financial crisis and is again proven with the economic impacts of the coronavirus. Without profound change in the ruling economic system, the costs will be passed to the poor.

We should not be afraid in this time. Most of what to do immediately about coronavirus is already known: wash your hands; don't touch your face so often; stay home. While indi-

vidual action is important, it will not stop an epidemic. Only collective action will. Organise locally to care for each other and prioritise reaching and supporting the most vulnerable communities.

Additionally, groundWork has taken the following decisions to help slow down the pandemic.

Effective from Friday, the country has been on lockdown. But will this mean all domestic workers and casual workers get paid; how do we support staff with logistics and additional costs, to build a new work routine, and keep a sense of community during this time; how do we look after our children at home and how does life continue meaningfully?

We understand that we are a privileged NGO and many of our community partners do not have the ability to take the needed drastic action that we can and that is now asked of them.

While our meetings with partners have all been called off, and we are urging our partners not to hold any local community gatherings that were planned, we realise it is important for people to organise at the neighbour-

hood level to ensure that everyone is informed of the crisis and what they need to do and to organise mutual support.

As NGOs we need to figure out how to support community organising as appropriate – far beyond this three-week lockdown. In this time of crisis we must be vigilant and find ways of ensuring that democratic practice is strengthened rather than weakened.

- One of the practical ways of doing this is for government and corporates to roll out, as a matter of urgency, free wi-fi and data across townships so that people stay in contact and build democratic practice in new forms. Corporates must drop data charges.

- Government must not use this time to push through projects that people have questioned and are not just. Developments that require public meetings and consultations must honour these processes, and government and corporates must not use this crisis to deny democratic participation.

- We urge government to immediately deal with the mass transport system as a matter of utmost urgency and take action to ensure that people who have no choice but to use this system are supported and that the taxi industry itself is supported to ensure the safety of their passengers.

- We are very mindful of the escalation of the coronavirus (or Covid-19) pandemic. We need to take extraordinary measures to protect our staff and families, especially considering that our public transport and fragile healthcare system put our vulnerable communities in particular at risk.

We are working closely with our healthcare partners through our Global Green and Healthy Hospitals campaign to make their systems more robust and to meet the most pressing of our environmental health challenges.

We wish you all strength through this challenging time.

Peek is an environmental justice organiser, campaigner and the director of groundWork, Friends of the Earth, South Africa.