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AN UNFETTERED LOCKDOWN WILL DRAG US FURTHER INTO AN ECONOMIC MORASS

No right-thinking South African doubted the necessity of the lock-down for the past three weeks. President Ramaphosa was widely lauded for his decisive and clear leadership. The majority of South Africans adhered to the regulations of the past three weeks, because we believed that the infection curve would flatten and that lives would be saved. Many excused the unintended consequences of police and defence over-reaction, and even understood that the curtailment of basic human rights may be necessary for the greater good. When our president announced a two-week extension of the lock-down, he was emphatic that some regulations would be relaxed in due course. Most of us understood the need for the extension, and we welcomed the prospect of the relaxation of the regulations to help the economy's recovery.

Where are we now? A cabinet meeting last Wednesday on the easing of the lock-down ended inconclusively. The five ministerial clusters could not emerge with one consolidated plan. Another cabinet meeting was due to be held on Monday 20 April. Then a virtual cabinet meeting took place on Thursday 16 April, followed by a media conference, chaired by the responsible minister, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. This, however, brought very little clarity about the way any economic recovery measures would be put in place, and only served to emphasize that any easing would only take place after 30 April. Her main message was that very few regulations would change and that changes would be gradual. It also became clear that even where there would be easing, the main aim would not be the recovery of the economy, but for purely practical reasons. The main categories for easing regulations would be in the pipeline of necessary services, including plumbers, electricians, hardware stores and car spare parts. Some mines would only be opened after 30th April, and purely because if they were left empty too long, underground explosions may take place.

To put it mildly, this was a colossal disappointment. How can the recovery of the economy and the prevention of further job losses and poverty count for so little? What is behind this apparent illogical (and some would say foolish) decision?

There are in cabinet (and society at large) two views on how the Covid-19 pandemic should be managed: the health side and the economic side. The health side (with the full support of the securocrats) are in favour of a longer and unfettered lock-down. The economic side supports a more balanced approach: keep the lock-down for the moment, but ease the regulations as soon as possible and gradually to give the economy the best possible chance to recover. These two should never be played off against each other. But it seems as if the lock-down proponents have the upper hand at the moment, with the economic proponents taking a back-seat. Thursday's media conference was clear proof of this.

Another example of the visibility of the lock-down supporters is the speech of Prof Saleem Abdool Karim last Monday during a public debate. Karim is an epidemiologist and chairperson of the ministerial advice committee on Covid-19. It is probably his arguments that motivated the cabinet's interim decision and Dlamini-Zuma's media conference:

- The lock-down bought time for the state and the country to prepare to manage the inevitable higher infection curve. This includes hospitals (and other buildings), beds, testing kits, masks, ventilators and burial places.
- What is unique about South Africa's strategy, is that we have 28 000 social health workers who have been deployed country-wide to screen people and seek out infections; the previous week

460 000 temperature tests and about 90 000 full tests had been completed; this would result in the number of infections increasing;

- By using a statistical instrument to determine the number of cases per day, the success of the lock-down could be assessed. If the average increases per day for the 10-16 April week were more than 90, it means that the increase is still high (and the lock-down may have to be extended after 30 April). If the daily average is between 45 and 89 cases, the curve is flat and only if the average increase is less than 45, the lock-down could be lifted gradually;
- Perhaps the most important remark: it does not matter what we do, a steep incline in the infection rate (probably peaking in September) is inevitable. South Africa will not be able to escape it, especially amongst poorer communities and with winter on its way.

Most of this sound good and acceptable. But even the “buying time” argument raises some questions. Do we do enough tests? Our target of 10 000 per day is nowhere in sight, with the average now just over 5000 per day. How will 28 000 health workers be able to trace the virus without test kits? Do we have enough masks and disinfectants?

But the major question that arises is the following: if a much higher infection rate and a peak in September is inevitable (irrespective of what we do), why is the argument of its proponents still that the lock-down must remain in place unfettered for the full 35 days and that it may even be extended again? Why is the efficiency of the lock-down then measured in terms of the number of infections and not our preparedness to manage the inevitable peak? If the peak is inevitable, there will never be few enough infections to lift the lock-down (or even relax it) - until the damage to the economy is irreparable. The argument of the proponents of an unfettered lock-down is apparently that when we are “ready”, we will be able to ease the lock-down regulations and manage the peak - but note: not prevent or flatten it. And it is not our business what impact this would have on the economy - we are here to save lives. This reminds one of the statement of the former Health minister Aaron Motsoaledi that it is not his responsibility to determine how much the National Health Insurance system would cost.

The very necessary balance between the health and economic factors can be brought into play when the economic consequences of an unfettered and lengthy lock-down are brought to light. Economist Dawie Roodt recently wrote on his blog that South Africa’s inevitable economic downturn because of the impact of Covid-19 and an unfettered lock-down could be compared with the economic decline of Greece during the past ten years. Greece’s ailing economy had resulted in a fall off 20% in its Gross National Product (GNP) per person. The consequential greater poverty resulted in an increase in its death rate of 1 person per 1000 of the population. If this is projected on South Africa, Roodt states that if we have only a 10% fall in GNP, 0.5 more persons per 1000 of the population will die because of the poorer economy and greater poverty. This would be 300 000 over the next ten years. Roodt concedes that this is obviously a rough estimate, but the point is clear. A poorer economy has resulted in people dying, and this could also happen in South Africa.

If our death rate because of Covid-19 is presently estimated at between 300 000 (0.5% of the population) and 600 000 (1% of the population), why worsen it by letting another 300 000 people die because of damage to the economy? If we can get the economy earlier on the road to recovery, the deaths of 300 000 people can be reduced or even prevented. But this argument is seldom heard in the Covid-19 debate. That a change in the parameters of the debate is necessary, is further strengthened by the fact that it is becoming clear that very few of the economic and business support measures seem to have had any effect so far. Recently, a group of authoritative economists told President Ramaphosa: *Our view is that a protracted lockdown won't necessarily have the effect of ridding the country of the virus, but it will result in unacceptably high health and economic consequences.*

This economic argument does not even take into account the other consequences of the lock-down. Amongst these are the increasing social unrest and vandalising of shops - because people do not earn wages or salaries and social allowances do not make provision for them. Social unrest will

further increase because food parcels are not delivered widely enough, are unevenly distributed or there are misconceptions on the criteria of who qualifies for them. Therefore, vandalising will inevitably increase - and the police and the defence force cannot be everywhere. There are already members of the police who are hesitant to enforce the regulation in certain communities. They are tired of being taunted or having stones thrown at them and they are scared of a second Marikana.

After Thursday's feeble media-conference one is inclined to doubt (for the first time in the pandemic) the wisdom of some government decisions. One almost wants to say: Minister, do not expect people who are hugely affected by the lock-down - South African business - to contribute any longer to the Solidarity Fund. Because it is clear that some decision-makers do not understand adequately how the economy works and how businesses function. And Minister, do not expect that the people who are the worse affected by the lock-down - the poor and those who became unemployed recently - to wait patiently in their over-crowded shacks and crowded communities for the food that will not arrive. It is clear that many decision-makers (who receive a salary every month) have no clue what it means all of a sudden not to receive a wage or salary anymore - and as a consequence go hungry. Therefore, expect more social unrest, vandalization and theft of food and basic goods.

What is the rationale for the stupidity that cigarettes and tobacco products cannot be bought in the same shops and at the same time that food is bought? It means that the state loses billions in tax that could have been used in the fight against Covid-19. Instead of an income for the state, it has resulted in a stronger illegal market. What stupidity is it that a country where the police cannot cope under normal circumstances, neighbourhood watches and community forums are barred from helping to protect life and property in a time of disaster? They may not be known to the responsible minister, but they have been working with local police for years to the advantage of the communities.

Against this background, it seems logical and responsible immediately to ease the lock-down regulations considerably, and not only after 30 April, so that the economy can start recovering. If we as a country can limit the fall in GNP per person with a mere R1000, we can save the lives of thousands. It is absolutely necessary that the debate on Covid-19 and the lock-down be deepened to include the negative consequences of the present lock-down, including future economically related deaths caused by deepening poverty.

It is, finally, very important that President Ramaphosa balances the economically-related deaths and suffering and the health-related deaths before he and his cabinet finally decide on the easing of the lock-down regulations to start the economic recovery - and definitely before he accepts advice to extend the lock-down after 30 April. To his credit, Prof Karim said on Sunday in an interview with Rapport that South Africa has already utilised the benefits of the lock-down and we won't get more benefits from the lock-down. This is a clear indication that we now have to look at easing the lock-down immediately.

President Ramaphosa, some ministers apparently do not have the insight to manage the Covid-19 pandemic on both a physical and economic health level. You will have to intervene urgently.

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