

Public Statement on COVID-19

The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) is the only statutory academy in the country established to provide government and the general public with evidence-based advice on issues of pressing national concern. Through its membership of outstanding scientists from across the disciplines, Academy members such as Professors Salim Abdool Karim, Quarraisha Abdool Karim, Glenda Gray, and Shabir Madhi are already working tirelessly in advising the South African government on effective ways of dealing with the pandemic. There are in fact many other Academy members doing important scientific research on the pandemic including Professor Helen Rees who is leading the South African component of a global vaccine trial to identify treatments for COVID-19.

Beyond these influential contributions of our members, ASSAf believes that as the national academy it has a further responsibility to make public its position on COVID-19 at this historic moment in South African and world history.

The respiratory disease COVID-19 is caused by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) and has spread across the world at an alarming rate with more than 4.63m confirmed cases and more than 311,000 dead at the time of writing (mid-May 2020). There are as yet no effective treatments and no available vaccines to provide immunity against infection and prevent disease.

Under these circumstances, the primary response of national governments has been to mitigate the risk of the spread of the disease through measures such as physical distancing, travel restrictions and national lockdowns.

The success of this complex of public health actions has been uneven around the globe and dependent on many factors such as how quickly governments respond (through testing and contact tracing, for example) and how efficiently life-saving equipment is deployed.

The South African government's response has been effective and rightly acknowledged both at home and abroad. At the moment, the rate of growth of infections and death rates in South Africa is among the lowest in the world and also among BRICS countries.

ASSAf recognises and applauds the South African government for underlining the fact that the national strategy has been based on scientific evidence and guided by the advice of scientists. This was achieved despite uncertainties resulting from limited and evolving epidemiological and medical evidence and the pressure that comes with responding to new and emerging scientific information.

In such fast-moving and uncertain contexts, it is perhaps inevitable that different views will result among scientists themselves – such as how, when and where to ease the lockdown. Yet what cannot be denied is that strong, science-based governmental leadership has saved many lives for which South Africa can be thankful.

The leadership of ASSAf believes, however, that the government's response to the pandemic must be further strengthened by attending to the following **three concerns**.

First, it is crucial that the National Coronavirus Command Council, and the structures reporting to it, such as the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19, include in its advisory bodies scientists from a much broader range of disciplines. While it is important to have epidemiologists, vaccinologists and infectious disease experts on these bodies, we believe that the pandemic is not simply a medical problem but a social problem as well. This means that social scientists and humanities scholars should also form part of these advisory structures as the following examples illustrate.

Psychologists need to advise on the far-reaching mental health costs of the pandemic following extreme forms of isolation. Sociologists need to

advise on the efficacy of social distancing in human settlements marked by inequality. Anthropologists need to advise on meaningful rituals of mourning when numbers are restricted for funeral attendance and family members cannot touch loved ones in their final moments. Economists must advise on how to enfranchise workers such as the self-employed.

Social work academics are needed to advise on managing family distress including the rise in domestic violence and the social effects of lockdown on children and the elderly. Political scientists must advise on the norms that should govern the relationship between government and its citizens in emergency conditions. And historians of pandemics can advise on lessons learnt that could be invaluable in making sense of the crisis and its likely course – for example, what happened with the so-called Spanish flu of 1918 when some cities or countries opened prematurely.

In partnership with the medical scientists, government would benefit from such an inclusive, multidisciplinary approach to science advice that can only strengthen the leadership response to the pandemic.

Second, it is critical that the National Coronavirus Command Council expands its focus to the regional African context. A virus, especially this rapid transmission coronavirus, does not respect national borders. In normal times, thousands of Africans travel back and forth every month between South Africa and the other SADC states and beyond. It is vital that the regional connectedness of our African neighbours is accounted for in the deliberations of the National Coronavirus Command Council. We should do so not only because of the regional, integrated character of the public health crisis but as a statement of solidarity with African neighbour states with even more precarious national health systems. Through the exchange of scientific ideas and the sharing of support, the pandemic offers a strategic opportunity for bolstering regional co-operation in fighting the pandemic.

ASSAf enjoys valuable and productive partnerships with African scientists through, for example, the Network of African Science Academies (NASAC), the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) and The World Academy of Sciences Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Partner (TWAS-SAREP). In fact, ASSAf proudly hosts the International Science Council's Regional Office for Africa that brings together African scientists to influence the international science agenda *guided by regional priorities*. ASSAf believes that the collective expertise of leading scientists from across the African region would fortify a continental response to the pandemic in line with the vision of the African Union.

Third, while it is understandable that the work of the National Coronavirus Command Council deals with managing the immediate crisis, it is not too soon for a broad range of scientific advice to be drawn on to address urgent concerns such as the future of the economy, business, education, human settlements, the environment and, of course, health care reform. The novel coronavirus has laid bare the deep inequalities in our society. We dare not reset as a country without addressing the dangerous fault lines exposed by the pandemic.

In this task, government must use the best available scientific evidence that is being generated across South Africa such as the highly significant Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM). CRAM is a nationally representative sample of 10,000 people who are surveyed in six waves to collect evidence on child hunger, household welfare and social behaviour in relation to COVID-19. This kind of scientific data, as one example, will be invaluable in reconstructing South African society in a post-COVID-19 world.

In conclusion, there is an indispensable connection between science and the public trust. In the face of a pandemic, with all the fear and uncertainty of a novel virus, the credibility of governmental authority depends more than usual on winning the trust of the public. And there is no better way of maintaining that public trust than by speaking with

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one voice on the authority of evidence-based science and employing remedies in the pandemic that uphold the values of our Constitution.

To this urgent task, ASSAf commits the multidisciplinary expertise of its membership in the ongoing service of advising government in these challenging times.

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