

Release date: 9 May 2020

Lockdown Puts Strain on Families and Starts to Cause Tensions Between Neighbours

By Thami Majiki

Papa Mako is a 29-year-old man from Sebokeng Zone 12 (in Gauteng) who makes his living cutting grass and maintaining yards. There hasn't been much work for him during this pandemic and he is now relying on his mother's pension to survive.

When the lockdown began, Mako, like many other people, followed the rules and put down his bush cutter. However, a week later, he had had enough of sitting around and not generating any income for himself. He was starting to be a problem in the house, with his mother complaining that he eats a lot.

He decided to go out to continue working, and to deal with law enforcement as he comes across them. Mako works with a friend from Zone 11. One day, as they were out looking for work, they came across a group of police and soldiers. As usual, a lot of people who were in the area started running at the sight of the police.

Mako's friend said they shouldn't run since they were out looking for work. But Mako, realising that their work is not listed as an essential service, told his friend they should run. But the police were too close to escape, so Mako threw his bush cutter over the wall of a yard he was standing next to and used the rake he had to pretend like he lived there. His friend joined the group of fleeing citizens.

This is the challenge of most informal traders in the townships: they don't sell or provide essential services, therefore have no income, and have no savings. Mako doesn't think the R350.00 offered by government is enough. He argues that he can make that amount of money in a day or two, and it is not enough to meet all his needs which includes supporting his 3-year-old child. Mako says he spends almost R1000.00 a day in maintaining his child and his living expenses, and the grant is simply not enough.

Mako now spends his time indoors, watching movies in his room, arguing with his mother and "just sitting around all day doing nothing". He sweeps the yard every morning and works in his garden to try and avoid arguments with his mother. In his time outside recently, Mako noticed that most people sweep the yard around their houses, and up to the street. Children have started playing their various games in the street, sometimes where neighbours have swept and this has been causing conflicts as well. Mako recently got into an argument with two women in his street because he chased away the children playing in front of his yard. He tried to tell the mothers to keep their children at home and follow the rules of the lockdown, but that only sparked a fight between them. He no longer wants to go out and engage the members of the street.

This is what is happening in our communities because of this pandemic. The youth are playing 'catch me if you can' with the police and there's no place for youth at home unless they watch movies all day; resulting in fights with parents in the streets because the children have nowhere to play.

Other community members are also not happy about the way most people are not following the regulations, and fear that this behaviour will only extend the pandemic. Mamosa, a resident of Zone 12, says she is worried about the youth in the community.

“They don’t seem to have a care about what is happening,” she says. “We should use this time to reach out to them and also focus on other issues such as substance abuse.”

Mamosa is one of the parents Mako is not speaking with because her children were playing in front of his yard. She wants to help the youth solve their issues but has found the lockdown very difficult as a parent of young children in the township, and many are feeling this too.

This happens often in township communities. People often fight with each other over things that they have no control over and because we don’t receive information the same way or take it the same way. Some people in the township are not following the regulations because of a lack of awareness or information. Some are frustrated and searching for work to earn a little money. It has become an “us versus them” situation, and organising in these conditions is extremely hard.

The working class is not experiencing the pandemic the same way as the middle classes. But even within the working class, people are not experiencing the pandemic in the same way. Some of the reasons for this include educational inequalities, as well as overcrowding in their homes. Some homes in Sebokeng have over ten family members in the same house whereas others have three people in a four bedroom house. This is why it is difficult for the working class to organise and work together, even during this pandemic, to lift the burden of the experience on the entire township.

With the relaxation of some of the regulations, people like Mako will now be able to go out and provide their services to the township. They will require a permit, have to observe social distancing, wash their hands for at least twenty seconds, use face masks and practice good hygiene. As we slowly reopen the economy, the measures to curb the spread of the virus must still be observed. The working class needs to raise its consciousness and this period needs to be used to educate ourselves for the betterment of the citizenry of this country.

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