



SAFER PLACES:  
RESILIENT INSTITUTIONS AND  
NEIGHBOURHOODS TOGETHER  
**SPRINT**

LEARNING BRIEF 1

**The impact of COVID-19 on safety,  
wellbeing, and vulnerability to  
crime and violence**

2020



An initiative of the South African  
German Development Cooperation:



Implemented by:  
**giz** Deutsche Gesellschaft  
für Internationale  
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Implemented by:



The intelligence of change



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The Learning Network exchange sessions are an opportunity for civil society organisations (CSOs) who have a wealth of knowledge, commitment and experience, to collectively grapple with urgent responses and the long-term systemic, programmatic, and institutional changes required in addressing violence and crime prevention. Each learning brief is a short thematic write-up including research and key discussion points raised in the session.

# SUMMARY

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**This is the first in a series of learning briefs produced by Isandla Institute under the Safer Places: Resilient Institutions and Neighbourhoods Together (SPRINT) Project.**

The SPRINT Project is a joint initiative of the South African-German Development Cooperation with the support of the GIZ – Inclusive Violence Prevention Programme, implemented by Isandla Institute and Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU NPC). It was conceptualised in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to assist selected communities across South Africa with building resilience.

This first brief is the result of the session entitled "The impact of COVID-19 on safety, wellbeing, and vulnerability to crime and violence held on 05 November 2020." It includes an overview of the SPRINT project, the nature of violence and crime in South Africa, and some reflections and lessons on the impact of, and response to, COVID-19 by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

The SPRINT Project was conceptualised to assist selected communities across the country with building resilience in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

# SPRINT PROJECT OVERVIEW

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**This is the first in a series of learning notes produced by Isandla Institute under the Safer Places: Resilient Institutions and Neighbourhoods Together (SPRINT) Project. The SPRINT Project was conceptualised to assist selected communities across the country with building resilience in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

The devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa has amplified risk factors for violence and crime in vulnerable communities. As such, there is a need for the upscaling of targeted, area-based interventions that promote violence and crime prevention, and the use of area-based violence prevention intervention (ABVPI) tools. The SPRINT Project is an opportunity to grow capacity in the utilisation of these tools and help foster a conducive context for implementation.

## OUR VISION

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Ultimately, the long-term vision of the SPRINT Project is to have effective area-based violence and crime prevention approaches integrated into the development and management of vulnerable urban communities. To that end, our four key objectives are as follows:

To further develop the violence and crime prevention knowledge built up within the South African German Development Cooperation and its partners since 2012 and to work around area-based violence and crime prevention interventions through facilitating its practical implementation.

1

Our key

To mobilise local violence prevention intervention thinking, in order to address community violence and crime challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4

## objectives

To ensure that the knowledge, tools and practices developed by the South African German Development Cooperation and their collaborators in the field of area-based violence prevention are shared with a wide range of stakeholders.

**2**

**3**

To embed area-based integrated violence prevention intervention approaches institutionally within relevant national government departments, within key municipalities and within civil society to ensure sustainability.

# OUR THREE PATHWAYS

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The SPRINT Project has two distinct, but inter-related, pathways which work towards the third pathway, the institutionalisation of effective area-based violence and crime prevention approaches integrated into the management of vulnerable, urban communities.

The Learning Network pathway consists of CSOs and includes organisations from across the built environment, youth development, violence and crime prevention, and gender-based violence prevention sectors. The Learning Network creates opportunities for peer exchanges through regular network meetings; the creation of learning and advocacy documentation; as well as multi-stakeholder engagements with other CSOs, municipalities, and national government departments and agencies; to share knowledge drawn from the experiences of participating organisations.

The Laboratory pathway involves capacity-building processes with participating municipalities and CSOs; an in-depth situational analysis of four sites; and hands-on mentoring support with two specific sites with the implementation of a Community Development Fund. It focuses on co-designing and implementing practical, area-based solutions to violence-related challenges.

Finally, the Institutionalisation pathway aims for active engagement in advancing area-based violence and crime prevention approaches through sustained policy, support, and resources. Key in this pathway is the project's Steering Committee led by the Department of Cooperative Governance (DCoG) who together with the Department of Human Settlements (DHS) as well as National Treasury and SALGA oversee and endorse this initiative.

## LEARNING NETWORK MEMBERS

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The Learning Network is constituted by a group of CSOs working in the human settlement and safer communities sectors. Representatives are based across South Africa including Durban, Cape Town, Pretoria, and Port Elizabeth. For some members, violence and crime prevention is a central

focus of their work, for others this is a new or emerging framework. Learning Network members see this as a chance to share their own experiences and good practice, to learn from one another, and to take what is discussed back into their work.

## THE LEARNING JOURNEY

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This initiative will contribute to strengthening and empowering a Learning Network amongst already well-established CSOs, working closely with municipalities and other partners to apply approaches and tools for violence prevention through urban upgrading, in line with the objectives of the Integrated Urban Development Framework and other relevant policy frameworks, particularly in the human settlement and safer communities sectors.

It will enhance their capacity through training, structured exchanges, and knowledge dissemination and support municipalities with the implementation of area-based interventions that promote the building of safer communities. This will ease risk factors for, and build protective factors against violence and crime through co-creation and improved ownership in selected areas. Such interventions entail a package of social, economic, and infrastructural interventions, including the promotion of opportunities, especially for young people.

The Learning Network will progress through a series of discussions. This thematic journey is conceptualised in two parts. The first is context setting and contextual which relates to COVID-19, its impact on neighbourhoods, and implications for violence prevention interventions. The second part focuses on institutions and systems needed to implement violence prevention interventions including issues of partnership and resourcing. The diversity of participants within the Learning Network and their varied experiences, knowledge and expertise offer a deliberate and unique cross-section of CSOs and is central to the success of the Learning Network. Each learning brief is a short thematic write-up including research and key discussion points raised in the session.

“Safety of public spaces and within communities impacts profoundly on the mobility and quality of life of citizens and their opportunities to participate in public life and developmental processes. With each year that violence remains prevalent, the number of South Africans who have experienced and witnessed violence increases, and so does the extent of national trauma. This has serious consequences on the health system, our ability to build a cohesive national identity, and our ability to raise a new generation of safe and healthy children.”

(SaferSpaces. 2020)

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SAFETY, WELLBEING, AND VULNERABILITY TO CRIME AND VIOLENCE

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## VIOLENCE AND CRIME IN SOUTH AFRICA

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One of the ways that underlying issues of poverty and inequality are evident in South Africa is the prevalence of violence and crime. Violence and crime are articulated in different ways. It can be difficult to have the full picture of the state of crime and violence in South Africa, especially regarding some crimes which tend to be under-reported. However, the impact of crime and violence is widespread and includes pain and trauma, economic loss, eroding social cohesion, unfulfilled human potential, and a national psyche of fear.

According to Hellmann (2020), we understand that violence and crime stem from a complex web of risk factors including substance abuse, fragmented families, social inequality, lack of support and nurturing, amongst others. South Africa has developed a progressive and enabling policy framework for prevention as articulated across the the South African Constitution, the White Paper for Safety and Security (WPSS), the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), and the recent National Strategic Plan for Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP GBVF).

Despite this, violence prevention is not systematically and holistically prioritised and criminal justice-focused responses are still predominant.

COVID-19 has exacerbated many of the underlying stressors that lead to violence and crime, this includes the stress of the loss of livelihoods and life, frustration over inadequate access to services and during lockdown, increased pressure in childcare and tending to the sick, and stress of living in a time of great change and uncertainty. This has been further compounded by the militarised response to lockdown which saw police and army patrolling some neighbourhoods. Their task was to enforce regulations and in some instances, they did so violently. There were instances where police or security personnel in the employ of the state engaged in violent crackdown (against perceived illegal behaviour) against regulations.



### **Militarised response**

There were situations where police or security personnel in the employ of the state engaged in a violent crackdown (against perceived illegal behaviour) against regulations. An example of this is the case brought by the South African Human Rights Commission and Housing Assembly against the City of Cape Town, citing examples from Khayelitsha, Ocean View, and Hangberg where law enforcement and the city's anti-land-invasion unit (ALIU) had evicted people and torn down their homes during lockdown level 3 (Kiewit. 2020)

## **THE IMPACT OF COVID-19**

December 2019, the World Health Organisation reported the 2019 novel coronavirus or COVID-19. By January 2020, WHO had declared the COVID-19 outbreak a "Global Health Emergency of International Concern", and by March 2020 it was declared a "Global Pandemic". As the international infection rate and the death toll climbed, scientists and doctors searched for treatments and cures while healthcare systems across the world heaved to respond to the sick. Global trade and delivery chains flexed, the travel industry was grounded and social media was flooded with origin theories and images of empty streets around the world.

By the end of 2020, over 79 million cases of COVID-19 were recorded worldwide resulting in 1.7 million deaths (WHO 2020). While COVID-19 vaccines have been developed and are being rolled out across the world, the impact of the pandemic will be long-lasting.

South Africa entered its first hard lockdown (Alert level 5) from midnight 26 March 2020, coinciding with a downgrade by Moody's Investors Service. As the country with the highest number of cases recorded on the African continent, it is evident that South Africa has been hit hard by COVID-19. The pandemic and its resulting impacts have placed pressure on several already strained services, disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable where it has been evident that inequality affects availability, access, and quality of services. This has been further compounded in instances where, for example, fear of contracting COVID-19, transport issues, or concerns about the availability of medication meant that people were not accessing health care.

*"Social comorbidities - those rooted in South Africa's wide levels of income, spatial, gender, racial and wealth inequality - play as important, or more important, a role as physical comorbidities such as diabetes and heart disease, resulting in the already-vulnerable being hardest hit"* (Osborne and Choga. 2020).

The dynamic nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the complex nexus of emerging and amplified development issues has meant that responses have to be integrated,

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dynamic, and simultaneously responsive and anticipatory. As a consequence, we see a need for more spatially targeted interventions which meet identified needs. While it has been a period of much support, solidarity, and, in some instances, humour; it has also been a time of great uncertainty, struggle, and loss.

*“South Africa was initially praised for getting ahead of the pandemic by beginning preparations before cases were confirmed, and instituting a strict lockdown early on, which initially appeared to halt transmissions. However, the government failed to institute adequate measures to safeguard people’s incomes, protect their wellbeing, and support the economy; the socioeconomic impact swiftly outweighed the impact of the virus itself” (Osborne and Choga. 2020).*

In a joint statement (2020), International Labour Organisation (ILO), Food and Agricultural Organisations (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the World Health Organisation discussed some of the impacts of COVID-19 globally, which were seen mirrored in South Africa. This includes an unprecedented, sometimes devastating, challenge to the systems which sustain human life including food, health, education, and livelihoods. In South Africa, this challenge was compounded by the weaknesses already existing in these systems leaving many sick, hungry, not working, and without access to adequate support and services.

In July 2020, Jain, Budlender, Zizzamia, and Bassier released a working paper examining the National Incomes Dynamics Study: Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS CRAM) data to better understand the impacts of COVID-19 in South Africa. They observed a 40% decrease in active employment in South Africa. In almost half of these instances, the job losers did not expect to return to their jobs. They also found that “women, those with lower levels of education, those in manual occupations, informal workers, and the poor face the greatest net employment losses” (2020:2).

During lockdown there were reports of increased gender-based violence throughout South Africa. In April 2020, the Police Ministry reported that the police had received over

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1: Brigadier Mathapelo Peters (Acting Police Ministry Spokesperson) for South African Police Service (SAPS). Media Statement released on 05 April 2020.

2 300 calls/complaints between 27 – 31 March 2020 and that between the period January 2020 and March 2020 the number of calls/complaints was 15 924.<sup>1</sup>

In November 2020, Basic Education Minister, Angie Motshekga, stated that more than 300,000 primary school pupils have possibly dropped out of primary schools across South Africa (Masweneng. 2020). By January 2021, Basic Education Director-General, Mathanzima Mweli, reported that 15% of learners “could not be accounted for in the system” (Govender. 2021). While investigations into the number and causes for absenteeism and dropouts are ongoing, it is believed this is partially caused by the costs of sending children to school (including fees, transport, materials), especially when there has been extensive job loss; the intermittent schedule or home-schooling mechanisms (including online schooling which is inaccessible for many); or that older school children no longer see the benefit in attending school for securing a livelihood.

Another impact of COVID-19 in South Africa can be seen in the way that it impacted people living in South Africa emotionally and psychologically. The unknown nature or trajectory of the pandemic left many feeling isolated and stressed and there was an increasing awareness of the importance of social support systems to address immediate needs and to foster and grow solidarity and connection. One example of this is the number of Community Action Networks (CANs) that were formed during lockdown.



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## Community Action Networks

Community Action Networks (CANs) are groups of people who take part in the design and delivery of services by collectively engaging about issues of a community and taking action. The CAN is envisioned to build on the existing strength and ability of the community, without needing external support. During

COVID-19, there was an increase in CANs who would, for example, organize grocery shopping for vulnerable persons and feeding schemes.

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Another impact of COVID-19 was the challenge and in some instances adaption, of the regulatory rules and systems. An example of this is Government Gazette No. 43167 which called for a cessation of evictions during lockdown. While its implementation was uneven, it set an interesting principle and to some, offered much-needed security.

As South Africa has moved through the different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, we have come to have a better understanding of the virus, its growing and dynamic impact, and

the different interventions needed. Through this process, we have watched the ebb and flow of violence and how it is experienced in South Africa. For example, the complex relationship between violence and the consumption of alcohol and how the rate of violence decreased when alcohol was banned (Child. 2020) or how for some school children the closure of schools has meant being locked up at home with their abusers without the relief of school (McManus and Ball. 2020).

## CIVIL SOCIETY'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

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CSOs have played an important role in South Africa's response to COVID-19. Their existing networks and relationships of trust, together with their ability to work across many sectors have meant CSOs are placed to rapidly respond to dynamic, emerging priorities including loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, inadequate sanitation, increased gender-based violence, and more.

The work of government officials, who are often restrained by bureaucracy and whose current ways of working "emphasises standardisation and control", have benefited from the information that CSOs can gather and the supply chains CSOs can activate (Hamann et al. 2020).

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 IN THE WORK OF VIOLENCE AND CRIME PREVENTION

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When asked to share about how COVID-19 is affecting issues of safety, violence, and crime, there were similar issues clustered around topics including:

- Joblessness, unemployment, loss of income, job insecurity
- Hunger and food insecurity
- Gender-based violence, violence against children, sexual violence, and abuse of children
- Increase in crime
- Youth dropping out of school and youth vulnerability to gangsterism
- Increased inequality and reduced social cohesion
- Increased police brutality and clearing of occupied land
- Stress, uncertainty, anxiety, and mental health

Many of the issues that emerged are interrelated: for example, the loss of livelihood and a lack of viable alternatives. This has meant that for some people crime has become the only apparent option or that they've had to become innovative and created alternative income, such as the system of charging protection fees.

Gender-based and domestic violence was a common observation raised in the session with one participant commenting that for many people their place of safety from violence was their work and so under lockdown those individuals are instead confined with their abusive partners. Another participant shared that it has been evident that the increased frustration during lockdown from being at home and possibly unemployed, increases the incidence of violence as frustration is taken out on partners and/or children.

Another issue highlighted in the discussion is that of access to services including how many people haven't been able to access clinics, despite critical conditions, with no alternative ways to access medication.

Issues of access to accessible, good quality water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) systems are not only necessary in normal living but essential in guarding against COVID-19. One issue that was raised is that informative messaging at the beginning of lockdown in South Africa was based on the assumption that citizens have regular access to clean, running (indoor) water and didn't include those who have irregular access to water, rely on water tanks, or share WASH facilities between 30-50 families. Temporary interventions included the roll-out of water services, particularly water tanks. In some instances, COVID-19 responses have led to

improvement to some basic services, and while positive, the question arises of how sustainable these changes are as the pandemic continues.

## WAYS OF WORKING

For some organisations, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant interpreting the work they've been doing from the perspective of COVID-19 to, for example, promote improved basic service delivery in informal settlements. COVID-19 has necessitated that some CSOs move "quite intentionally beyond our scope of work" to respond to the immediate emerging needs arising from COVID-19. Examples of this include raising awareness about COVID-19 prevention and relief provision through emergency responses, including food parcels.

The third stream of work includes analysing the institutional responses to COVID-19 and working in parallel to support and build the capacity of officials and community leaders. There was a realisation that in this isolated space there was a need to create linkages between community leaders within their settlements as well as across networks and communities. Beyond meeting the immediate needs – by providing food parcels, PPE, and data to enable community leaders to support vulnerable homes, communicate more effectively with each other, and share stories – CSOs have also helped provide cohesion and build solidarity in a space where people were feeling disconnected.

Another component of this support during a time of isolation and struggle was using feedback loops and focus groups. In these discussions, community members have the opportunity to raise issues – which they saw as greatly beneficial. Given the restrictions around face-to-face engagements, some organisations have had to shift their engagements to virtual platforms utilising social media and other virtual engagement mechanisms. In some instances, this includes offering participants mobile data so that they can message,

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voice call, or video call and participate in one-on-one or group sessions. Difficulties with this shift in operation include persistent connectivity issues, but also that participants need access to smartphones which enable platforms like WhatsApp, electricity to charge their phones and to be available during sessions.

## **MOVING INTO THE “NEW NORMAL”**

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From rapid emergency responses to deep engagement and solidarity building, the response to COVID-19 has been an incredible period of hard work, innovation, adaptability, and learning. These adjustments, or in some instances complete shifts, to content and ways of working have occurred during a global pandemic of a novel virus and so for many have come at a time of change, stress, and hardship.

As the South African economy continues to struggle, CSOs in South Africa are raising concerns about how they will meet more, and increasingly complex, needs. In 2020, a survey of 1015 CSOs from across Africa by African NGOs and EPIC-Africa revealed that 69.34% of responding CSOs has already reduced or cancelled their operations and 71.58% believed that “governments had failed to recognize and utilize local CSOs’ skills, experience and networks in response to COVID-19” (SANGONET. 2020).

**As the South African economy continues to struggle, CSOs in South Africa are raising concerns about how they will meet more, and increasingly complex, needs.**

course to respond to existing needs, prepare for emerging needs and make sure not to lose what was gained through COVID-19 responses.

*“Importantly, there are no templates or “best practice” responses. Each activist group or initiative will need to negotiate its own responses to these tensions, taking into account their local context and priorities” (Surmeier et al. 2020).*

In considering the impact of COVID-19 on safety, wellbeing, and vulnerability to violence and crime; the impact of COVID-19 in South Africa; and the response by CSOs, it is evident that there have been many complex issues and impacts of COVID-19.

# KEY MESSAGES

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**In addressing the complex issues and impacts of COVID-19, spatially targeted responses that address specific factors of risk and vulnerability, i.e. ABVPI, can have a positive impact on where people live, work, and play. To enable this, there are four key areas of intervention.**

The first is the need to meet basic needs of people living in South Africa, including food security and people living free of violence and crime, through the provision of basic services and relief through an adaptive and responsive system of support. This system should utilise existing and emerging structures both within government structures but also utilise, grow and strengthen the work of CSOs, to provide spatially targeted responses.

Secondly, the ongoing recognition of the importance of social cohesion and solidarity building both in immediate relief and in longer-term system change, especially in the current context of anxiety, stress, uncertainty, and opportunity is critical.

Thirdly, innovation and key lessons learned during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic should be captured and examined. Key areas of focus including new and emerging roles played by different actors, innovations in systems, opportunities for systemic evolution, and key entry points for sustainable impact, as seen in integrated area-based violence prevention interventions (ABVPI).

Finally, Institutionalisation is essential for taking forward these recommendations and ensuring there is sufficient policy support and resources available to implement area-based violence prevention interventions and meet needs.

COVID-19 has had a massive impact on the lives of people in South Africa including loss of livelihoods, illness, and increased vulnerability. It has put a strain on several already overburdened systems and by doing so, has highlighted areas for urgent support as well as unique opportunities for innovation.

# CONCLUSION

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**COVID-19 has had a massive impact on the lives of people in South Africa including loss of livelihoods, illness, and increased vulnerability. It has put a strain on several already overburdened systems and by doing so, has highlighted areas for urgent support as well as unique opportunities for innovation.**

Civil society has played an important role in responding to COVID-19 and working in parallel and coordinating with local government efforts. It is important that we utilise platforms, such as the SPRINT Learning Network, to reflect on good practice and how this can be carried forward into the 'new normal'. This becomes especially important when we reflect on the resource constraints moving forward and as civil society determines how to meet emerging and growing needs.

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The dynamic nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the complex nexus of emerging and amplified development issues has meant that responses have to be integrated, dynamic, and simultaneously responsive and anticipatory.



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