Zifunyanwa ngabatheni? Parcelling out food during the South African lockdown

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"Zifunyanwa ngabatheni iifood parcels?", which translates as *"Who qualifies for food parcels?"* has been a key question amongst community members in Plettenberg Bay ever since the local municipality started to deliver food parcels in this South African town during the lockdown. On the 23rd of March 2020, the South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, called a national shutdown due to the outbreak and the spread of COVID19. The national shutdown was received with mixed feelings. Although many South Africans accepted that it is necessary to prevent the spread of the virus, the concern was, "*how are we going to survive without an income to purchase food?"*

This essay reflects on what unfolded among people in Plettenberg Bay when the local municipality started to deliver food parcels. "*Zifunyanwa ngabatheni iifood parcels?",* the critical question raised consistently within the community, guides my reflections of how access to and choices about food, especially during the lockdown, are connected to entrenched racial, economic and social inequalities in South Africa. I argue that these inequalities are not adequately addressed in the solutions provided by municipalities, policies, public health measures and the numerous official measures set in place during the lockdown. Being able to eat and secure food, as a basic human resource, has been a crucial concern during the lockdown. Yet the social policy architecture to address this through targeting certain individuals and invoking the notion of the 'deserving poor' leaves much to be desired. It certainly falls short of achieving food justice, a concept which, as I show, is more attentive to the needs and challenges of the people, than mere delivery of food parcels. This essay also raises what food justice could really mean - at a structural and personal level - even beyond COVID19.

The policy context of the food parcel roll-out

Plettenberg Bay is a small coastal town in the Western Cape Province's scenic Garden Route with a population of 56 4222, which includes 21 914 households (Western Cape Government 2018). Because of its setting, tourism is the dominant economic sector, with this reflecting racial, spatial and economic inequalities that date back to apartheid. As is the case with other coastal towns along the Garden Route, whites tend to be the owners of the tourist economy's resources,

services and amenities (hotels, guest houses, tour companies etc.), while the labour of blacks and coloureds ensures that this economy thrives. Most tourist sector employees work in restaurants, guest houses, pubs, beaches, transportation and the domestic service industry serving tourists. But the national shutdown has meant that most businesses are not able to operate, and this has of course increased the existing figures for unemployment in the town dramatically. Officially, in 2018, the unemployment figure for Plettenberg Bay was 27.9% (Western Cape Government 2018). Labour in this town is cheap and precarious and workers are employed according to the principle of "no work no pay", so the current unemployment situation is undoubtedly considerably higher.

South African policy architecture for poverty alleviation is ostensibly pro-poor. This means that the government, given its available resources, needs to ensure that there are programmes in place that protect people who - for whatever reason – are unable to survive economically because they cannot participate adequately in the economy. Programmes like the child support grant, elderly grant and disability grant are examples of this pro-poor social policy, which explicitly targets those whose basic needs are in excess of their income and ability to participate in the economy. Mkandawire defines the social policy architecture of targeting as involving ''eligibility to social benefits [and] means-testing to determine the 'truly deserving'" (2005:1). Beneficiaries of programmes in targeting social policy architecture are required to go through tests which include scrutinising their income, examining taxes and behavioural and status screening. As he shows, means-testing is also used to narrow the pool of people who will be beneficiaries of policy or programmes that aim to alleviate poverty (Mkandawire 2005). The rationale is that the State has limited financial resources for universal provision (Mkandawire 2005).

The alternative to targeting is universalism in social policy architecture. In terms of this universal framework, social benefits are seen as a basic human right for all, and each and every member of the population must benefit from policies. Universalism would of course fail to address the fact that certain South Africans are obviously more disadvantaged in society than others. Targeting in policy architecture therefore seems to be a pro-active response to entrenched and new inequalities in society. But is this in fact the case?

Targeting in the food parcel roll-out and social policy architecture

Targeting in social policy is embedded in a neoliberal market economy which promotes privatisation of critical social services such as water, energy, health and education (Mkandawire 2005). Privatising these sectors means that those who can afford to pay by participating in the

labour market can do so. Before the lockdown, South Africans who were seen to be unable to pay for these social services were able to apply for government relief programmes, and citizens have been expected to make the right choices in investing in their wellbeing and their development. But the lockdown has in fact demonstrated that the labour market and work conditions in South Africa are very unstable. The workers in Plettenberg Bay, who were able to make informed choices at the start of this year, are in a very different position now. The arbitrariness of South Africa's social policy architecture is evident in the arbitrariness of arrangements for food parcels to those in Plettenberg Bay.

At the beginning of the lockdown, the announcement of a strategy of food relief by national government tapped into the idea of food parcels. In Plettenberg Bay, the local municipality, non-profit organisations (NPOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), individuals and philanthropic organisations bought food parcels for people living in townships. Before the parcels were delivered, forms were circulated for residents to sign if they required food parcels. This proved deeply confusing for community members because the form came from the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) and people who signed were expected to return the forms to their ward councillors. Who, then, was responsible for the parcel roll-out - the local municipality, district municipality or SASSA? A week after the process started, food parcels were delivered to communities by ward councillors and some community members. A big truck drove in, stopped and dropped the food parcel at some houses, while passing others. In my street, people came out watching the delivery of the food parcels. People who didn't receive parcels stared in disbelief and asked, "*zifunyanwa ngabatheni iifood parcels?*" Who qualifies for food parcels? Stories in the community were shared that in some streets people ran behind the truck asking, "What about us? We also do not have food. Who qualifies for food parcels?".

The question of *zifunyanwa ngabatheni iifood parcels* in Plettenberg Bay quickly flooded social media. People demanded that the local municipality answer this question. Community members raised the very obvious fact that people who used to work before the lockdown no longer had the means to purchase food. Community members also raised concerns that the ward councillors were only giving food parcels to people who will vote for them in the upcoming 2021 local government elections. Other allegations were that politicians took the food parcels and gave them to their family and friends. Above all these concerns people in Plettenberg Bay continue to ask, "who qualifies for food parcels?".

COVID19 in many ways has redefined the face of the 'deserving poor' that is need of food relief programmes. Currently in Plettenberg Bay, many people who were working at the start of the year

live in renovated 'reconstruction and development programme' (RDP) houses, have DSTV (pay channel TV) and even cars packed in garages, but are also food insecure because the economy has shut down. They are as in dire need of food relief programmes as the people who live in a squatter camp are. Yet they do not fit into the stereotypes of what poor people look like in the mainstream media. It is for these reasons that the people of this town demand to know "*Zifunyanwa ngabatheni iifood parcels*?" Is the current social policy architecture of targeting just, fair and equitable? Does it take into consideration the predicament of many who have a long history of economic exploitation and educational deprivation and still have extremely precarious work, even though their resilience has allowed them to purchase homes before the lockdown?

The inadequacy of the food parcel roll-out reflects the shortcomings of South Africa's social policy architecture of targeting. This architecture assumes that static targeted groups ("the deserving poor") can be neatly differentiated from those who are employable and have adequate remuneration to meet their basic human needs. The architecture has been criticised for assuming that labour markets are stable and provide people with regular income (Mkandawire 2005). It has also been criticised for involving excessive administration costs in trying to identify the 'deserving citizens' for social welfare and being vulnerable to manipulation. Like policies based on means testing, the parcel roll-out creates a social divide amongst community members. The scales of means-testing are used to identify who is more deserving of social welfare, creating the problematic notion of the 'deserving poor' versus those who should have no reason to be poor. There is also a strain placed on those who are subjected to means testing for social welfare programmes - they are expected to perform 'being poor'.

Containing disease or fighting poverty through food parcels?

Plettenberg Bay economic activities have relied on the movement of bodies and things. To a greater extent than most other economic activities, the tourist industry revolves around people constantly moving, serving or being served, travelling or being driven. With the lockdown, this movement had to be brought to an abrupt halt. Some would argue that the majority of the people in Plettenberg Bay, both black and white, rich and poor, have been affected by the lockdown. It is equally true that most cannot access large stores of savings, investments, loans or capital that will allow them to survive from day to day.

"Social distancing" has been a key imperative during the lockdown. In fact, this requirement has been enforced – often very violently – by the military and the police. In Plettenberg Bay the police more than the military have been responsible for policing during the lockdown. In the evening the

police patrol the streets arresting those who do not have permits to move around. Even the movement of people who rely on friends and extended families for a hot meal is restricted. The outbreak of COVID19 has led to the official foregrounding of our primary challenge as a public health one, requiring a “neutral” and “universal” public health solution. Public health concerns were therefore never brought into conversation with the social realities that affect most South Africans’ health needs. Consequently, people in Plettenberg Bay (and many other South Africans) simply could not afford to distance themselves – even for one week – from work without dire consequences, but have been compelled to ‘stay home’. We therefore need to ask ourselves who primarily benefits from the current fixation with ‘social distancing’ and ‘stay home’? Those who have children in private schools, have salaried and stable jobs that allow them to work from home, and are able to enjoy the comforts of being ‘safe’ at home are certainly secure. But many others are most definitely not. It is therefore important to consider how the parcelling out of food has been a cynical move to coerce poor people to stay home. And there has been a reframing of our social reality as social distancing is impossible to achieve if people do not have food. The poor therefore need to be well fed so that they do not move around unnecessarily and increase infection rates.

The roll-out of food parcels during the lockdown has been justified by the urgent need to maintain social distancing to prevent the spread of COVID19. Government officials, NPOs and philanthropist organisations emphasise that buying food parcels and delivering to people will prevent unnecessary movements. Food vouchers are discouraged as they will require the ‘poor and poor working class’ to move around when purchasing food, thus exposing themselves and their families to the COVID19. Another reasoning is that people might not even have the transportation money to get to the shops and buy food in town. This suggests that only those who can afford to buy their food can go to the store and purchase what they need. The poor and poor working class cannot go to the shops; if they are given food vouchers and money to purchase their food, they will move around, create chaos and make the spread of COVID19 worse. This thinking cements the stereotypes we have about the poor and poor working class in this country - the poor do not have any agency, they cannot make decisions even when it comes to something as intimate as purchasing food. It suggests that the poor are indecisive and those who can afford to assist, must to go to the shops and pick the content of the food parcel; the poor need rice, mielie-meal, fish oil, a tin of pilchards, beef stock and cabbage. Please buy the green sunlight soap because they need to wash their hands to prevent the spread of COVID19. Buying food parcels for the poor and poor working-class homogenises them. It assumes that they have a

universal taste in food, that they eat the same food and have the same nutritional needs and might not even have food allergies.

Increasingly, we are seeing hunger and poverty being framed as a public health emergency that needs to be addressed so *that the virus doesn't spread*. The problem with this framing is that it erases the urgent need to address food insecurity in South Africa as a social justice agenda. Ensuring food security through food parcels to maintain social distancing frames the issue of food insecurity in South Africa as a temporary one. The absurd logic of this is the assumption that when the curve of COVID19 flattens and the economy "goes back to normal", people will be food secure and poverty will be a thing of the past. I argue that the outbreak of COVID19 is magnifying the social problem of food insecurity which we already know.

Food Parcels and the denial of dignity

Requesting a food parcel from local municipalities, NGOs and philanthropist organisations requires people to share their vulnerabilities. The forms that people need to sign have sections which ask about their age, race, employment and number of people in the household. Those who reach out to NGOs and philanthropist organisations must usually disclose intimate parts of their lives. I am part of a community fund started by young people in Plettenberg Bay called #PlettFoodFund. We promote civic duty by asking people to donate funds so that we can buy food parcels for families in need and deliver it to them. As a contact person for #PlettFoodFund I have received requests for food parcels where people disclose the most intimate part of their lives. Examples of messages include, "*can you please assist me, I am a young mother with two children, we haven't eaten in two days"*. "*My name is B, can you please assist me and my family with a food parcel, my mother is even afraid of texting you. She says she is ashamed of asking for food"*. "*I am a foreigner, I know the government only assists South Africans, can you please help me. I do not have food, I can even give you my passport number".* From these requests, it is clear that those who need food feel that they have to share the intimate parts of their lives in the hope that they will be believable and qualify for assistance.

The delivery of food parcels either by the truck from the municipality or a small car from an NPO turns one's vulnerability into a public spectacle. When the big truck stops and delivers food to some houses, it reveals to the community that house number 45 does not have food. The intimate personal and financial struggle of one's household is now brought to the fore. As the #PlettFoodFund team we also deliver food parcels and enter into people's homes. We have experienced cases when we explain who we are and what we stand for, the Grandmother

shedding a tear, saying, “I cannot even provide for my family”. Even when we are inside the house we experience the vulnerability of the adult being exposed in front of the children and other family members. Although we deliver food with small cars, every time we take out a food parcel, we leave a statement to the whole street that people at house number 60 are struggling. There is a social stigma associated with not having food and it comes from the idea that we should be self-sufficient as individuals. The lockdown has shown that even families who used to earn income in Plettenberg Bay do not have food now. The delivery of the food parcel might bring feelings of shame, hopelessness and embarrassment, even though people know that most people do not have an income to purchase food.

Food is an important part of life in Plettenberg Bay; as in any other tourist town people here do not make food to only feed their families, but their everyday work at restaurants is about food production and even the aesthetics of food. Although this is the case, Plettonians are not a homogeneous group - they come from different racial and cultural backgrounds. This means that they create different kinds of dishes, which are both a reflection of South Africa’s food preferences and specific cultural preference. For example, the black community of this town is dominated by migrant families from the Eastern Cape who speak isiXhosa. Amongst this group the staple food of *mngqusho* – samp and beans, rice and pap and a variety of meat is still preferred. From house to house the etiquette around the preparation of these dishes vary. A Sunday at Kwanokuthula is not the same without a variety of *braai* (barbeque) meat from pork chops, beef, chicken and lamb. This is of course coupled with beers either at Skhulu’s School Boy’s Lounge or at N2 Lounge. We buy the *braai* meat from Lele and Nomaceko, both located closer to the spots where we drink beer. Of course, any other day wouldn’t do without chicken feet which we grew up eating at school. For adults who still have this school craving, we buy chicken feet from Lele and Deon. Beyond the cultural and location differences, Plettonians, like any people located on the coast, enjoy fish and chips. Traditional fish shops are our favourite spots in town for fried hake and *snoek* (baracoutta) with chips. The fancy restaurants and pubs pride themselves in serving Plettenberg Bay’s finest seafood with wine. Across racial, cultural and economic groups a *braaied snoek* is something locals enjoy. Even during Heritage Day, which is regarded as South Africa’s braai day, rest assured Plettonians will braai a *snoek*. Easter holidays for us are nothing without pickled fish or a variety of fish dishes. The lockdown has changed the way we eat and socialise in this beautiful town. Those who can afford to buy seafood do so and enjoy the pleasures of sharing it with their families during lockdown. The families who cannot afford seafood now only rely on the tin of pilchards that is included in the food parcel. This might remind them that they are still part of a beautiful coastal town which prides itself on seafood.

Quest for intimate food justice

"Zifunyanwngabatheni iifood parcels?" requires us to reflect on food insecurity at an intimate level. Lewis (2017) argues that food production, access, preparation and consumption is a personal journey which allows people to make meaning of their relationships with their families and communities. Acknowledging the intimacies related to food allows us to move beyond thinking about food merely in terms of biological needs. Opening ourselves up to thinking about the intimate relationship we have with food pushes us to appreciate the relationship we have with the environment (Lewis 2017). Food is not only about satisfying physical hunger, but it is a way of creating and sustaining the intimate relationships we have with ourselves, families and communities (Lewis 2017). The gathering at a dinner table or having friends for a *braai* are some ways of recognising how food builds and strengthens the intimate ties that bind us. "Who qualifies for food parcels?" is therefore a question of who is worthy of intimate, family and community relationships that food is an integral part of catalysing in South Africa. *Zifunyanwa ngabatheni iifood* parcels? It is also a question of who is worthy of making choices about what kind of food matters, and where that food is shared. The food parcel roll-out totally neglected the agencies and choices of food parcel recipients.

Providing people with food parcels during the lockdown does not address the structural determinants of food insecurity. It sanitizes the fact that food insecurity is a result of poverty, unemployment, racial and socioeconomic inequalities. The selective delivery of food parcels embedded in the social policy architecture of targeting in Plettenberg Bay creates a social divide amongst the poor. It cements the idea of the 'deserving poor' in which some families are more deserving of food parcels than others. Who qualifies for food parcels allows us to think about the ways we have homogenised the so-called poor as having the same food preference and the same taste. It demands that we reflect on the stereotypes we have about the poor. The food parcels contain the same content for each family. The community of Plettenberg Bay is not a homogenous one. Although most families enjoy seafood that comes with living closer to the coast, not all of them eat rice and cabbage that is part of the food parcels delivered. *Zifunyanwa ngabatheni iifood parcels*? forces us to think about ways in which food handouts deny people their dignity. A food parcel being dropped at my house attracts a public spectacle that cements the shame which comes with "I cannot afford to buy food". *Zifunyanwa ngabatheni iifood parcels?* is also a question that requires us to think about our quest for intimate personal justice. Who is worthy of intimate justice that sharing food nurtures by connecting us to our personal, family and community?

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