COVID-19 and state coordinated responses in South Africa’s emerging developmental state

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ABSTRACT
It is no longer debatable that the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 caused a resurgence in the role of the state and propelled the need for novel responses reinforced by the structural component of the state. The structural component of the state refers to the administrative power, resources and capacity of the state to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in the context of COVID-19. This paper explores the relationship between the central and local states in coordinating efforts to attenuate and respond to the pandemic, and the meaning of state-led responses for South Africa’s developmental state ambition. The South African government demonstrated political willingness to utilize its structural component by distributing its administrative capacity, resources and power to all the spheres of government to fight the pandemic through its stimulus package. The country’s pandemic responses reveal good implications for strengthening institutional arrangements and consolidating a well-coordinated and capable developmental state.

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Introduction

Despite the entrenchment of the global neoliberal order, the role of the state in addressing social, political, economic and environmental fallouts has remained at the heart of global development for centuries. The fundamental debate brought by the relationship between the state and markets is centered on the contested power, role and orientation of the state in a capitalist society (Thatcher 2017, 179). These observations are based on the traditional role played by states in the Great Depression, Reconstruction of Europe, Asian Financial Crisis, 2009 Global Financial Crisis, and the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (Khambule 2021a; World Bank 1997). In these various instances, the state was at the epicenter of directing social and economic responses and developmental outcomes, despite many years of rolling back the state in delivering public goods to citizens. The realm of the state’s role in responding to pandemics remained least contested because of the social uprooting of pandemics.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportune moment for many countries aspiring to become developmental states because of the extensive state-led responses required to manage the pandemic’s catastrophic impact. This is evident in the counter-cyclical role played by states in mitigating the social, economic and health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resurfaced the interest in the role of the state (International Monetary Fund 2021; World Bank 2020; Zondi 2021). This interest emerges from two significant positions: the large stimulus packages that broke the barriers of neoliberal-driven minimalist state involvement and austerity measures. The second position is driven by the need to shape the post-COVID world order by ushering in new policies that promote social protection for the marginalized, the elderly, the informal economy, women, and the youth. This period also presents many countries with the opportunity to build the required institutional capacity long undermined by the neoliberal agenda of reducing the role of the state.

While there is increasing global literature on the state’s role during economic crises, the debate is often framed on the role of the central government as the traditional automatic stabilizer. This thinking has resulted in the lack of literature focusing on the role of the subnational state (local governments) during pandemics and other economic emergencies. This is despite the emphasis on local government being in proximity and a better position to design appropriate policies built on their intimate knowledge of local conditions. This
paper explores the relationship between the central state and local state in coordinating efforts to mitigate and respond to the pandemic in South Africa. This relationship is also studied in relation to South Africa’s developmental state ambition long undermined by the institutional deficits of the local state to deliver developmental outcomes. South Africa is one of the many developing nations that seek developmental statehood to address high levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality as reflected in the National Development Plan’s (NDP) vision 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2012). South Africa adopted the largest stimulus package in sub-Saharan Africa, and one of the largest amongst its peers in middle-income countries. This stimulus package needs to be understood in relation to the country’s developmental state ambition to address the triple challenges that stood to be amplified by the damaging impact accompanying COVID-19.

The paper argues that COVID-19 presented an opportunity moment for South Africa’s emerging developmental state to balance its commitment to developmental outcomes and economic growth through state-led recovery strategies. Methodologically, the paper utilizes secondary data on central and local state-led responses to the pandemic in South Africa and links it to developmental state theory as the paper’s theoretical framework. The developmental state theory is important because it assumes the supremacy of the state in social and economic development matters. This supremacy emerged in the battle against COVID, therefore putting the state at the epicenter of managing the pandemic. The units of spatial analysis are the national and subnational spheres of government in line with COVID responses. The paper argues that strengthening the capacity of the local state increased the government’s ability to manage the pandemic better than the previous model that neglected the capacity of the local state, plunging municipalities into incapacities. The activism of subnational governments in managing and responding to the pandemic signals a strong welfare role for modern developmental states underpinned by the developmental role of local governments.

The paper is structured as follows: apart from the introductory section, the following section discusses critical moments that reinforce the return of the state after decades of rolling back the state by neoliberal elements. A central focus is on the role played by the state – central governments in responding to crises and emergency periods. The paper then moves on to literature on the role played by subnational governments during emergencies, thereby showing that local governments have a key role in responding to emergencies. Based on that backdrop, the paper moves to focus on the role played by local governments in managing the COVID-19 pandemic because of the heterogeneous nature of territories. The section after that focuses on the strategic coordination of the various spheres of the South African government in managing the pandemic. This leads to another section on the meaning of the country’s COVID responses for the developmental state ambition long undermined by local government failures. The last section concludes the paper and delineates some lessons and implications on the re-emergence of state activism.

COVID-19 and the return of a (developmental) state

The role of central governments in mitigating pandemics and economic crises has been at the heart of the state and development for decades. History shows that the state is the automatic stabilizer of economic volatilities by adopting counter-cyclical policies to mitigate against the adverse economic impact on citizens, firms, workers and the economy (Bénassy-Quéré and di Mauro 2020). Similarly, the impact of COVID-19 resulted in countries across the globe looking into central governments to adopt policies to regulate social, political and economic activities to mitigate against the spread of the deadly impact of the virus. National governments implemented social distancing policies, and the lockdown of industries and economic activities, thereby causing the contraction of global economies. The IMF (2021) argues that the COVI-19 pandemic led to the sharpest global contraction in decades, with the stimulus packages adopted by countries diminishing the impact of the pandemic on all levels of livelihoods. Notably, the pandemic has rekindled the debate on the role of the state post-pandemic (Kambule 2022). The emergence of such debates is driven by the increased role played by the state in mitigating the pandemic and the need for the state to prolong social protection schemes.

The supremacy of the state’s role in economic development during and post-crisis was evident in the Great Depression of the 1930s, when states used fiscal capacity to increase transfers and subsidies to ensure sustainable development (World Bank 1997). It was also evident through the European Reconstruction period after World War II, where governments undertook the massive role of rebuilding their national infrastructure and economies (Kambule 2021a). Before the war, central governments had played a critical role in the growth and development of markets, such as the development of the telecommunication, agricultural, railway
infrastructure and industrial-led sectors of the economy (World Bank 1997). Post-war, many European states nationalized industries and created the monopoly of state-owned enterprises to streamline the reconstruction. During this period, three tenets were relied on: the provision of welfare benefits to counter the loss of income, the shift to a mixed economy, and the coordination of macroeconomic policies (Thatcher 2017). This period launched many welfare states in Europe because of the recognition of the central role played by the state in ameliorating socio-economic deprivations.

The 2008 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic heightened state involvement in social and economic development. Ricz (2021, 2) argues that every crisis period is an opportunity for the emergence of a developmental state that ‘might push incumbent governments to build developmentalist institutions which effectively promote both structural transformation and shared and inclusive growth’. This is observed in that, after decades of entrenching neoliberal policies in global development through liberalization, privatization and deregulation, the aftermath of the 2009 global financial crisis resulted in many states reconsidering the role of the state in regulating and addressing market failures. In East Asia, China’s counter-cyclical responses were noted to exemplify the Keynesian counter-cyclical strategy as the government adopted expansionary fiscal policies. This was done through an infrastructure-led recovery by increasing construction activities, employment expansion and overall economic activity through massive state spending to keep the economy afloat (Jiang 2015). The Indian government followed a similar path by implementing tax relief policies and increasing expenditure on public projects to boost economic activities to ensure mass employment is generated (Nirupam 2011).

A developmental state refers to a state-led economic development model that prioritizes economic growth accompanied by structural transformation as evident in East Asian developmental states (Ricz 2021). Developmental states are underpinned by a developmental and statist approach to economic development, with the political leadership dedicating state resources and capacities to pursue socio-economic outcomes (Mkandawire, 2001). In the COVID era, central governments used fiscal and monetary power to implement policies capable of stimulating the economy and cushioning citizens from suffering economic setbacks and improving economic resiliency at the household and industrial levels. This represents the supremacy of the state in economic development-oriented matters and safeguarding the social, political and economic rights to a just, fair and equitable life as opposed to a laissez-faire market-driven approach. Strategies adopted in the COVID era resonate and are found within developmental state thinking, whereby the state assumes a primary role in directing social, economic and market outcomes (Haggard 2018).

While many developing nations aspire to become developmental states, the roll-back of the state in the 1980s weakened the capacity of the state to control economies and develop effective policies to tackle developmental challenges in sub-Saharan Africa (Kambule 2021b). The neoliberal-oriented reforms implemented in many African states reduced the share of government revenue in the GDP and caused significant inefficiencies (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2005). Using the case of Ghana, Amoah (2021) argues that the COVID pandemic has brought the need to revive the role of the African state to help manage and address pandemics instead of depending on markets. Notably, many African states are riddled with incapacities in designing and implementing macro and micro-economic policies that promote sustainable industrial growth. This is evident in the low levels of industrialization, dependence on primary commodities and high poverty rates. Successful developmental states such as South Korea, China and Brazil have been able to catch up with some advanced economies because of the state’s ability to coordinate industrial economic policies and direct market outcomes (Evans and Hellar, 2018).

While the literature on developmental states has been growing at an alarming pace since the success of East Asian nations, the 2008 global financial crisis and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, much of the literature is still centered on the central government’s responses to these emergencies. Despite the growing importance of local governments in delivering social, economic and developmental services, little is known about their role during crisis periods, particularly in the global South. Dzigbede et al. (2020) underscore the agility of local governments in designing and implementing policies that could potentially lower the costs of recovery after disasters. It is essential to have a deeper understanding of the contribution of subnational state institutions in responding to the COVID-19, and the factors that inhibit effective responses from below. Reporting along national lines on the impact and responses to the pandemic obscures the role played by subnational governments in responding to the pandemic and understanding the social and economic implications of the pandemic at the macro level.
Local government and crises periods

The significance of local governments in the development landscape emerged at the height of the decentralization process that sought to give voice to local structures in influencing decision-making. For this reason, the key justifications for decentralized entities in the form of subnational governments are to bring improved governance, make informed decisions through participatory governance, and improve service delivery and accountability because of the proximity with citizens (Grindle 2007; Hart and Welham 2016). These assumptions also emerged with the increasing understanding that co-governance and co-production with citizens and community structures enhance and strengthen the capacity of local governments to deliver on developmental services (Rodríguez-Pose and Wilkie 2017). This is contrary to the lack of consultation by centralized governments and the inability to understand the needs of local communities, which undermines effective responses to localized community needs. From a development perspective, decentralization has emphasized the need for place-based development strategies that recognize the uniqueness of each locality. The novelty of this approach in responding to crisis periods remains understudied in the literature on government responses to emergencies.

A notable example of the role of local government during a crisis is in the case of subnational institutions responding to the Great Depression of the 1930s that plummeted industries, caused bankruptcy and unemployment in countries such as the US, Canada, Poland, and Australia. The US government tackled the economic crisis by increasing spending at all levels of the government in line with expansionary fiscal policy. The US government assisted by buffering the fiscal capacity of the local tier to respond to the crisis (Gordon, 2012). It is also noted that in 1927, the local government spent the highest share (56.7%) than the federal government (30.4%) and state government (12.4%), with similar trends also evident in employment figures (Higgs 2008). This demonstrates the importance of coordination between the local and the national governments, which enabled the capacity of local governments to target relevant citizens. This approach was essential because contractionary periods cause a surge in demand for local government services, particularly for those citizens at the end of the socio-economic ladder.

The role of local governments in responding to crisis periods was recently been observed in the 2009 global financial crisis, where local governments had to be innovative in ensuring they manage the economic fallout and the vulnerability of the poor and marginalized. Cohen (2011) observes that while the financial crisis caused an unprecedented economic impact in many industries, there are also examples of local governments that managed to evade the adverse effects of the financial crisis and emerged with sustained growth. Based on a survey by OECD, Clark (2009) finds that local governments in cities such as Paris, Warsaw and Miami demonstrated resilience and had prosperous local economies. The success of these local governments was attributed to factors such as human capital, urban innovation and strategic development planning (Cohen 2011). These key features are also dominant characteristics of economically prosperous local entities. Some faced pitfalls as a survey by survey the URBACT (2010) on 125 cities in 25 countries found that more than 80% of the cities recorded devastating industrial economic impact, a rise in unemployment and increased urban poverty. Some of these challenges are linked to the institutional incapacities of some subnational governments to respond to the global financial crisis, weak decentralized structures, and a lack of coordination with national structures.

The importance of local governments in helping meet national and international targets represents a significant milestone in the role played by subnational governments. This is evident in SDG implementation, with territorial spaces increasingly being recognized as important players in the implementation and meeting of SDGs (UNDP 2014a). Mejia-Dugand, Croese, and Reddy (2020) note that different countries follow diverging paths to the localization of SDGs. India is argued to have a centralized approach to SDGs by directing what local governments need to do as implementers, while Colombia is argued to have a decentralized model that allows all levels of the government to coordinate in implementing policies in line with pursuing SDGs (DNP 2017; Mejia-Dugand, Croese, and Reddy 2020). These distinct models of localizing SDGs have varying outcomes, with the Indian framework argued to fail to align to the SDGs, thereby revealing institutional incapacities to plan and coordinate all structures for development (Khan 2019). Such challenges undermine the expansion of the significant role of subnational institutions in delivering developmental outcomes to the citizens. The UNDP (2014b) emphasises that factors that shape political realities, socio-economic contexts and behaviors implore the need to ground solutions in the local contexts to ensure progress in meeting developmental goals.

While the above examples of the merits and challenges of decentralization stand true, there are also notable failures of decentralization in effectively responding to emergencies and daily operations.
Kusumasari, Alam, and Siddiqui (2010) observed that local governments face capability-related obstacles (monitoring, evaluation and dissemination) during emergencies. In the United States, the federal system and weak intergovernmental relations were blamed for the poor responses to the havoc caused by Hurricane Katrina (Birkland and Waterman 2008). Rodriguez-Pose and Wilkie (2017) note that challenges such as uneven capacities, coordination problems and the scale of implementation are some of the challenges facing many local governments. In South Africa, the lack of capacity within the local government system contributes to the ongoing failures in delivering services and responding to citizens’ needs. These problems are widespread in many developing countries, where the fiscal and planning incapacity of local governments invariably leads to weak subnational structures (OECD, 2020a). Essentially, these failures show that decentralization does not always yield the intended outcomes without solid institutions capable of strategic planning like in cities such as Paris, Miami and Warsaw.

**COVID-19 and the local state**

Much of the existing literature on responses to COVID-19 has been driven by the focus on centralized government stimulus packages. This approach has emphasized four critical areas: stabilizing the economy, protecting workers’ income and jobs, protecting businesses and protecting the marginalized without social security (ILO 2021). Such an approach was evident through stimulus packages adopted by countries such as Australia, China, the US, South Korea, and many other countries reviewed by the ILO (2020). These countries adopted policies that prioritized job security measures through assisting companies that could not operate during the lockdown period, providing tax breaks, introducing social protection schemes and universal wages for low-income households, and investing billions in measures to improve economic activities (IMF 2021). Some of these measures were noted to be instrumental in keeping people out of poverty by ensuring that household income is not affected, thereby producing counter-cyclical responses. In Australia, poverty rates and income inequality dropped during the pandemic, while only increasing in other countries with fewer counter-cyclical policies (Li et al., 2022). The commonality of these measures is that they were driven by the central government, with little emphasis on how local governments responded to the pandemic.

The World Bank Group (2020) contends that local governments are at the forefront of combating COVID-19 and managing responses. It is important to ensure that the spatial dimensions of COVID-19 are given sufficient attention. The social, economic and health impact can be studied from a territorial perspective. Observing the territorial health impact of the pandemic, the OECD observed that

In Italy, Calabria is the least affected region with 5.5 deaths per 100 000 inhabitants against 171 per 100 000 inhabitants in Lombardy, the most affected. Similarly in the United States, Vermont recorded 9.3 deaths per 100 000 inhabitants versus 184 in New Jersey. In Brazil, Minas Gerais recorded 41.8 deaths per 100 000 inhabitants while Distrito General death toll reached 120 per 100 000. Regions in South Korea and New Zealand were less affected overall. Sejong recorded 0 deaths per 100 000 while Daegu recorded 8.1 deaths per 100 000. (OECD 2020b, 5)

The highlighted territorial impact can also be explained from a socio-economic perspective. The degree of the impact of the pandemic on the economy and recovery depends on the territory’s socio-economic conditions. Essentially, spatial inequalities are likely to be amplified if governments adopt universal responses without effective intergovernmental relations and coordination with local governments. The fundamental problem that underpins these territorial differences is that density is connected to poor socio-economic conditions such as high poverty rates, poor housing conditions and the lack of access to healthcare facilities needed by COVID-19 patients (Basset, 2020). These factors influence the need for enhanced institutional arrangements between all levels of government to ensure effective pandemic responses.

Many regional and local governments are at the epicenter of managing the pandemic through spearheading decentralized healthcare, schooling COVID-19 protocols and other social services associated with the poor, marginalized, immigrants and vulnerable groups (OECD 2020b). A further EUR 2 billion was needed for a country like Australia because of the increased expenditure at the local government level despite the 7–12% decline in tax revenue (Wiener, 2020). Municipalities in Canada are estimated to have lost 10–15 CAD billion in the first three quarters of 2020, in addition to the ballooning cost safety measures and social protection schemes for the poor and marginalized (Federation of Canadian Municipalities 2020). These factors resulted in added pressure and responsibilities for municipalities across the globe, with further added pressure for municipalities of the global South where larger populations depend on municipal services they are unable to pay for. The small tax-base and the increased responsibilities for local governments in developing nations needed
significant transfers from central government. However, the limited fiscal capacity of many nations, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where only one country adopted a stimulus package that equaled 10% of the GDP, with many falling below 5% of GDP (African Development Institute, 2020), meant that local government had insufficient resources.

The World Bank Group (2020) advocated for innovative and community-led policies as active measures of contextualizing responses to promote the efficiency of local governments in delivering developmental services. In response to the increasing number of COVID-19 cases in South Korea, the Seoul metropolitan government rapidly scaled up its testing capacity and preventative measures led by the principles of promptness and transparency (Seoul Metropolitan Municipality 2020). Such an approach ensured the city was able to promptly respond to the pandemic and manage the outbreak based on innovation-led measures informed by local contexts of the city being an innovation hub. Similar responses were also noted in the city of Osaka, where the city officials implemented strategies to combat the spread of the virus, while also targeting the elderly population as 25% of the Japanese population is 65 or older (Osaka city, 2020). An essential undertaking from these cases is that these countries also ensured minimal damage to the livelihoods of the poor and marginalized.

While the South Korean example demonstrates a case of subnational institutions entirely using their autonomy and coordinating with other levels of government, Spain presents a different case. The central government in Spain usurped power from the independence of regional and local governments to implement a universal approach to managing the pandemic (Amat et al., 2020). This approach takes us back to the supremacy of the role of the central government, a role sometimes misused instead of developing multi-level governance responses informed by local needs and national goals. The danger of such an approach is connected to the failure to understand that each locality has its conditions and that universal responses often fail to cater to the needs of socio-economically lagging territorial regions. The Spanish approach is different from other European countries, ensuring that subnational governments are ‘responsible for critical aspects of containment measures, health care, social services, economic development and public investment, putting them at the frontline of crisis management’ (OECD 2020b, 5). These undertakings follow the decentralization process by prioritizing the role of local structures.

A crisis period is usually the most appropriate time to build institutional capacity at any level. In Turkey, the Marmara earthquake was critical in unlocking the local state’s response and changing the institutional makeup and design of the local sphere. Two critical points underpinned this juncture, ‘one driven from the bottom up by civil society and the other a top-down product of international diplomacy’ in influencing reform in the existing social contract (Pelling and Dill 2010, 30). Such an exertion of civil in the government’s responses to the emergency influences the reconfiguration of the state. Similar outcomes were observed in Taiwan, where a ‘whole society’ approach was adopted. Through this approach, ‘cooperation between state, local government and non-state institutions, particularly neighborhood committees, has resulted in a strengthened, holistic epidemic preparedness and response infrastructure’ (Schwartz and Yen 2017, 125). In the US, the Katrina and Rita disasters considerably changed the government’s control of national disaster responses (Waugh 2006).

**A COVID-19 synopsis in South Africa**

South Africa has the highest number of COVID-19 cases in Africa in terms of cases and mortality reported. The latest statistics show that the country has recorded over 2.9 million cases and more than 89,000 mortality cases since the first COVID-19 case was detected in March 2020 (National Institute of Communicable Diseases, 2022). In responding to the early stages of the pandemic, the national government implemented a Level 5 lockdown on 23 March 2020 to stop the spread of the virus. The stringent lockdown measures limited the movement of people, social gatherings and economic activity for more five weeks (The Presidency 2020). A series of easing lockdown restrictions followed until the country experienced a second wave in December 2020 and a third wave in September 2021, leading to the country closing social gatherings and limiting other economic activities that required mass gatherings of people in confined spaces. The second wave of restrictions had a knock-on effect on tourism and other accommodation-related industries at the height of the festive season.

Countries across the globe adopted various counter-cyclical measures to protect their citizens while also stimulating economic activities. The South African government adopted fiscal and monetary policies driven by the need to stabilize the economy, protect jobs, address the extreme decline in supply and demand, and provide social and economic assistance to the poor as per Table 1.

Adopting counter-cyclical policies in response to contractionary periods is an important measure to mitigate the kind of negative socio-economic outcomes. Bhorat
et al. (2021) observe that the stimulus package is one of the largest in emerging economies, and probably the largest in middle-income economies. As per Table 1, the R500 billion was divided amongst the many priorities the government identified as critical interventions to minimize the impact of the pandemic. The R100 billion job protection and creation package ensured industries minimize job losses, incentivised businesses to create more employment opportunities and assisting small firms. Importantly, R20 billion improved the health sector’s capacity to respond to the pandemic by improving the ability to trace, test, admit and provide healthcare essentials. The R20 billion to municipalities was essential in improving access to water and sanitation and providing shelter for the homeless.

Pre-pandemic, South Africa was one of the most unequal countries in the world. Inequalities in South Africa are entrenched in the country’s historical injustices commissioned by the colonial and apartheid regimes. Most parts inhabited by Africans were deliberately cut out from development and were deliberate, with Africans restricted from owning urban land. This disempowerment was through legislations, such as the Native Laws Amendment Act of 1952, which narrowed black people’s right to reside in cities and towns. It also occurred educationally, and left Africans with inferior healthcare and other public services (Todes and Turok, 2018, 2). The denial of access to industrial zones is also a denial of the right to meaningfully participate in the economy. These historical injustices entrenched social, economic and spatial inequalities that the post-apartheid government inherited. The NDP notes that post-apartheid South Africa further entrenched spatial inequalities by building low-income housing on the outskirts of cities with minimal service delivery (National Planning Commission, 2012).

The inherited social, spatial and economic inequalities consequently put pressure on the democratic dispensation to develop policies targeting the reduction of inequalities. Over the past two and half decades, persistent underdevelopment of the apartheid ‘homelands’ has exacerbated old apartheid inequalities. In addition, Statistics South Africa (2020) noted that economic inequalities in South Africa are mainly driven by income inequalities along racial lines, which suggests the country had not made significant progress in addressing income inequalities pre-pandemic. The disparity is largely driven by labor market (74.2%), followed by other sources (22.6%), 1.8% in in-kind income, 1.1% social grants and 0.4% through remittances (Stats SSA, 2020). Shimeles and Nabassaga (2018) observe at least 30% of asset inequality within countries was overwhelmingly due to inequality of opportunity. Against existing predispositions, the COVID threatened to amplify preexisting inequalities without effective counter-cyclical policies (Khambule 2021a).

Bhorat et al. (2021) define the necessity of providing income support to vulnerable households based on low levels of household income in South Africa. This resulted in low-income households being disproportionately affected by the pandemic because of several factors. Firstly, most low-income households earn below the minimum wage of R3500 per month, while others are active in the informal economy. Evidence shows that the informal sector recorded more employment losses than the formal sector in the second quarter of 2020 (Stats SA 2020). Further to this, a study by Wills et al. (2020) found that many households reported hunger incidents during the country’s hardest lockdown. These results are to be expected from those in the informal sector who could not make any income and remained with limited savings and no social security. This means that those in the informal sector, without any additional income, depended on the R350 special COVID-19 grant for unemployed individuals not receiving any other form of state assistance.

**COVID-19 and the coordination of state-led responses in South Africa**

While South Africa has three spheres of government (national, provincial and local government), an innovative approach to reporting COVID-19 cases was adopted through district (regional) municipalities playing an essential role in tracking cases and implementing responses. Using districts as reporting structures is in line with the country’s recently adopted District Development Model (DDM), which aims to improve the country’s intergovernmental relations framework and strengthen service delivery to realize the key failures and capacity constraints facing municipalities. The DDM aims to attenuate the culture of subnational governments working in silos from other spheres of government, the absence of coherence in

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**Table 1. Distribution of the R500 billion social and economic stimulus package.**

| Category                        | In billion Rands (R) | In billion Dollars (US $) |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| Loan guarantee scheme           | 200                  | 11.46                    |
| Job protection and creation     | 100                  | 5.73                     |
| Tax relief                      | 70                   | 4.01                     |
| Social grants                   | 50                   | 2.9                      |
| Unemployment Insurance Fund     | 40                   | 2.29                     |
| COVID-19 Capacity               | 20                   | 1.15                     |
| Municipalities                  | 20                   | 1.15                     |

Source: Adapted from the Presidency (2020).
development planning and improve the implementation process in the delivery of social and economic services (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2019). In linking the DDM with South Africa’s developmental state ambition, Khambule (2021c) argues that the DDM was established to create a capable local developmental state through district governments. Such an understanding suggests the creation of a developmental state from below. Many challenges confront the South African government because the local government sphere has failed to deliver basic services and deteriorating institutional capacity. The COVID pandemic created an opportune moment to test Khambule’s (2021c) assertion that the DDM was introduced to create a capable local state, albeit inherently weak structures had not been addressed.

From the R500 billion stimulus package, R20 billion was assigned to the local government to ensure effective water supply, provide food and shelter for the homeless and mitigate the spread of the virus in territories (The Presidency, 2015). The President further announced an additional R5 billion for municipalities to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2019/20 local government budget. These reallocations were approved in terms of section 20(6) of the Division of Revenue Act, 2019, including:

- R2.4 billion in Urban Settlements Development Grant allocations to metropolitan municipalities. These funds will be used for providing water and sanitation, mainly in under-serviced informal settlements and to cover the increased costs of more frequent waste management and other services.
- R1.5 billion in Municipal Infrastructure Grant allocations can be reallocated for the provision of water and sanitation, including where urgent maintenance is needed to restore the functionality of water infrastructure.
- R970 million in Public Transport Network Grant allocations may be reallocated, mainly for sanitization of public transport facilities.
- R306 million in the indirect Regional Bulk Infrastructure Grant was reallocated at the end of the 2019/20 national financial year and transferred to Rand Water to fund the roll-out of water tanks to supply communities without reliable access to water services (Presidency, 2020).

The government’s support was targeted at assisting municipalities in providing additional access to basic services for vulnerable communities during the lockdown period and sanitize public transport facilities as the economy was undergoing a phased re-opening (The Presidency, 2015). For the local government, this function is important in that it consolidates its role in the forefront of responding to the pandemic through implementing policies. These responses must be understood in line with the developmental duties assigned by section 153 of the Constitution to municipalities, and section 154, which instructs national and provincial governments to strengthen the capacity of municipalities to deliver developmental outcomes. In this context, the additional fiscal transfer to municipalities needs to be linked to the Constitutional mandate of strengthening the financial capacity of the local government sphere to respond to the surge in demand for local services, particularly from socio-economically disadvantaged communities. However, an important observation is that the COVID support was trusted in a sphere of government that traditionally lacked fiscal discipline and the capacity to plan and respond to the citizens’ needs.

Basset (2020) asserts that density is a major contributor because it is associated with critical developmental issues such as poverty, housing conditions and limited healthcare facilities. To respond to density predicaments in informal settlements, R2.4 billion allocated to improving urban settlements, particularly in informal settlements where low-income households reside in cities. The national and provincial Departments of Human Settlements, working together with municipalities, played an essential role in improving health standards in many informal settlements by decontaminating living spaces and providing necessary sanitation. This policy response is underpinned by the fact that population density and size determine the diffusion and effects of COVID-19 in morbidity and mortality (Goujon et al. 2021). In India, challenges were recorded in the local government administering informal urban settlements, particularly through the adoption of policies that forced migrants to temporarily leave urban centers during the pandemic (Auerbach and Thachil, 2021). However, the South African local government sphere proactively supported informal settlements through enhanced sanitation. This response stopped the mass movement of people and helped the country stop the rapid spread of the pandemic during the hardest lockdown period.

Through enhanced coordination with national and provincial governments, an important response by the local government was the provision of food parcels to the most vulnerable in communities. Non-governmental organizations in South Africa helped improve the government’s capacity to deliver over 250,000 parcels (Presidency, 2020). This task was executed through ward councilors identifying vulnerable populations to
receive food parcels. This role was instrumental in that it relied on the proximity of local government to community structures, with community leaders knowing vulnerable groups and families in their respective communities. This demonstrates the adoption of a state-society-led approach with a multi-level and multi-sector response to the pandemic. Targeted interventions have better chances of being effective because they are based on a needs-based approach (World Bank Group 2020). This approach enhances the effectiveness of the government’s responses targeted at those disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Amid the pandemic, the local government in South Africa played a significant role in the frontline by providing basic social services, PPEs, sanitation of public spaces, food parcels and temporary homeless shelters (Hlati and Maziwisa, 2020). In terms of the regulations issued under the Disaster Management Act in March 2020, municipalities were requested to revisit their integrated development plans (IDPs) and budgets to prioritize programs and responses to the pandemic. As an accountability activity, in June 2021, the DPME published a report examining issues and challenges South African municipalities faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey of all municipalities in the country revealed that 88% of the surveyed municipalities reported redirecting funds towards their COVID-19 responses, with 44% adjusting and approving their budgets to include expanded services relevant to the pandemic. This aligns with the general increase in government services during emergencies and economic downturns. As a social response, 85% of municipalities provided food parcels to the indigent, while 66% had provided soap and other hygiene products (DPME, 2019). This demonstrates the forefront role played by municipalities as first responders to the pandemic in South Africa.

Despite the economic fallout caused by the pandemic being explained at a national level, the real impact is felt locally by households, businesses and municipalities. The first lockdown in South Africa resulted in unintended consequences that led to 2.2 million people losing their jobs and the economy contracting by 51% (Statistics South Africa 2020). In this period, the eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality recorded approximately 10% (207,000) of the national job losses (Durban EDGE, 2020). Local government structures responded to this mandate by limiting the regulatory and administrative barriers facing small businesses. Many of the metropolitan municipalities in South Africa implemented recovery plans that included temporary permits for informal businesses to operate during the lockdown. There was a lack of emphasis on the local government’s informal economy response although the sector was disproportionately affected because of the lack of social security and many informal workers depending on daily income to sustain their livelihoods. Statistics South Africa (2020) revealed that higher job losses were recorded in the informal sector (21.9%) than the formal sector (10.8%) in the first and second quarters of 2020, during the height of the lockdown period.

While it is important to focus on the role played by subnational governments in responding to the pandemic, it is equally important to also reflect on the different territorial impacts of the pandemic in different regions. The OECD (2020b) observed that the health and economic impact of the pandemic differed in many cities. However, in the South African context, the spatial differences between metropolitan municipalities and small-town and rural municipalities also breed different realities. Many of the effective fiscal interventions adopted by the local government emerged from metropolitan municipalities because of their large revenue collection capacity instead of small-town rural municipalities. For example, eThekwini’s economic recovery plan prevented a 2% GDP loss (eThekwini Municipality, 2020). Turok and Visagie (2020) find that economic activities in metropolitan municipalities have recovered faster than in small-town and rural municipal regions, which may be linked to the lack of effective covid responses. This is primarily a result of metropolitan municipalities having the capacity to implement wide-scale business development support interventions than smaller municipalities. From this observation, it becomes important for the government to dedicate more resources to small-town and rural municipalities to improve the local state’s capacity to deliver developmental outcomes.

**COVID-19 responses and the meaning for South Africa’s developmental state**

It is clear that the impact of COVID-19 has brought back state-led recovery responses to the ongoing socio-economic vulnerabilities that threaten sustainable development. The varieties of state-led responses promote discussions on developmental states emerging from this crisis period. In Africa, state-led pandemic responses are viewed as the return of the state after years of rolling back the state (Kambule 2021b; Zondi 2021). While literature on state-led development tends to focus on the central government, the coordination of state-led responses to the COVID pandemic demonstrates the emergence of a new form of state activism driven by local institutions. In the South African context, the pandemic emerged when the government was strategising...
on a model to improve the capacity and performance of the local government sphere to meet the country’s developmental state ambition. The DDM was instrumentally used to plan and report on COVID from district/regional structures and presented an opportune moment to strengthen coordination and address service delivery problems. This approach ensured strategic coordination of government efforts based on an all-government approach using a mixed bottom-up and top-down approach, as evident in the role played by the local government in responding and managing the pandemic.

While much of the responses to the pandemic are framed as matters undertaken by central governments, many of the responses were implemented and planned with inputs from subnational governments at the grassroots level. In the South African case, the DDM allowed the various spheres of government to coordinate pandemic responses in a collaborative approach by involving executive authorities from local, provincial and national governments in the planning process. This was through the President’s Coordinating Council (PCC), consisting of mayors, premiers, traditional leaders, and civil society representatives. This structure shaped the role of local government in implementing the coordinated COVID-19 responses, particularly in providing essential basic services and administering food parcels to indigent citizens with the assistance of NGOs. Such an approach was instrumental in enhancing the state’s capacity to respond to the pandemic and ensure timely interventions reach the intended recipients. In China, grassroots and non-governmental organizations also played an essential role in helping the government respond quickly to the pandemic (Wang and Cheng, 2021). This case reflects an inclusive approach to developmental responses to the pandemic and ushers a period of democratic developmental states grounded on the mass participation of all sectors of the society in responding to emergencies.

Local governments played an essential role in responding to the pandemic based on their proximity by enforcing lockdown regulations, supplying personal protective equipment (PPEs), tracking and reporting COVID cases, managing public spaces, designing and implementing recovery strategies and ensuring targeted interventions to the most vulnerable in communities (World Bank, 2020). At the forefront, local government in South Africa catered to the needs of rural citizens by procuring water tanks to ensure uninterrupted access during the height of the pandemic. The provision of water and health-related equipment to citizens ensured the government’s commitment to SDGs’ on clean water and sanitation and the health and well-being of the citizens. These roles coincide with the growing role of local governments in implementing policies that facilitate the promotion of SDGs as observed in India and Colombia (Khan, 2019; Mejía-Dugand, Croese, and Reddy, 2020). The DDM provided the necessary policy space for stronger coordination between the various spheres of government to respond to the pandemic through increased fiscal capacity. This implies that improved government coordination has positive outcomes for government capacity and could potentially build the country’s developmental state ambitions from below through enhanced institutional arrangement.

The local state activism in ensuring improved living standards in informal settlements through local municipalities decontaminating informal settlements reflects a developmental orientation. Wilkinson (2020) identifies four major attributes influencing the need to decontaminate informal settlements. These areas are

These can be categorized as: (1) epidemiological vulnerability (e.g. fatality rates based on underlying health conditions and age); (2) transmission vulnerability (e.g. social mixing, hygiene infrastructure); (3) health system vulnerability (e.g. availability of intensive care); and (4) vulnerability to control measures, including social protection failures

Targeted government responses to these priority vulnerabilities were evident in vastly populated metropolitan cities such as Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban. Mbambo and Agbola (2020) find that overcrowded settlements, poor restructuring and unsolved land issues frustrated the government’s responses to managing the pandemic in dense areas. Ruiters (2021) blames the city of Cape Town for an unbalanced response to the pandemic focusing more on preserving revenue than ensuring full support to informal settlements. Contrary to the case of Cape Town, eThekwini went over budget to ensure vulnerable informal areas are decontaminated by working with other national and provincial departments.

In eThekwini, this approach can be attributed to the coordinated political willingness of authorities, similar to the political willingness found in developmental states. Hlati and Mazwiwa (2020) note that the eThekwini Metro incurred COVID-19 costs of about R620 million, of which R565 million was unfunded expenditure alongside an estimated loss of revenue amounting to R1.5 billion. In these two cases, the contrasting reality is underpinned by the overly free-market approach of the Cape Town government (which has produced stark inequalities), whereas eThekwini has a somewhat balanced approach that has earned the metropolitan the title of the most livable city in the world. While
unfunded mandates are a burden for municipalities, the eThekwini metro’s active role in managing the pandemic signals a strong welfare role for modern developmental states. Evans and Heller (2018) also observe that modern democratic developmental states ensure substantial investment in human development and welfare duties.

Cohen (2011, 4) poses the following questions, ‘Are local governments endowed with the power, resources and capacity to develop and put in place anti-crisis plans and programs? Can their actions really be effective?’ Two important points can be delineated in response to these questions in the South African context. Firstly, subnational governments, particularly lagging regions that depend on economic spillovers from cities, are unable to effectively respond to the welfare needs of their citizens because of a small tax base. This is evident in that only 85% of the municipalities provided food parcels for indigent citizens (DPME, 2019), this support was mainly from donations rather than the government. Small-town and rural municipalities have a significant share of the indigent population and informally employed unable to pay for municipal services because of poor socio-economic backgrounds (Reddy 2016). Observe that subnational governments ‘suffer from a scissors effect of higher spending and lower tax revenue, especially those with a volatile tax base and large social welfare responsibilities’. These factors resulted in a promotion of pro-cyclical policies instead of counter-cyclical policies, i.e. municipalities lacked a central database to support the informal economy. A city like eThekwini was the first to adopt an economic recovery plan in the world, and saved over R10 billion in foreign direct investment and cushioned against the worst outcome because of its institutional capacity derived from being a metropolitan municipality.

While enhanced government coordination in South Africa’s response to the pandemic is noteworthy, the redistribution of support for businesses needs to be criticized. By institutional design, most local governments are deprived of essential power and resources to respond to contractionary periods and pandemics because of the centralization of emergency (political and economic) responses. Support for business was divided into, R40 billion allocated for income support, R100 billion for job creation and R200-billion loan guarantee scheme, were centralized and resulted in weak and a lack of targeted responses informed by territorial needs. Without precise coordination of the central and subnational governments in targeted funding measures, the centralised functions cannot yield the required results regarding job creation and job protection measures. In addition to this, South African banks were blamed for refusing to disburse the government-backed Loan Guarantee Scheme to businesses during COVID. Out of the R200 billion, only R18.4 billion was disbursed (Mboweni 2022). This shows the lack of commitment by the banks to support the country’s economic recovery and threatens the building of the country’s developmental state. In leading developmental states (Korea, Singapore and Japan), state-owned banks played a leading role in supporting the governments’ economic trajectory. This implies the need for the developmental state of the twenty-first century to assign greater financial power to local governments to support enterprises.

Additional concerns emerged regarding the mismanagement of funds and food parcels. The Portfolio Committee on Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) noted instances of ward councillors distributing food parcels to friends and family members (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2020). In other corruption-related cases, the Special Investigations Unit (SIU) found that the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan municipality disregarded MFMA procedures by awarding a R24 million contract without following due protocol (Special Investigating Unit, 2021). In the OR Tambo District Municipality found an irregular contract in the door-to-door campaign where information was falsified (Special Investigating Unit, 2021). In Sekhukhune district municipality, the municipality was found to have acted in bad faith, facilitating the approval of a R26 million contract in breach of the Municipal Systems Act, 32 of 2000 (Special Investigating Unit, 2021). These maladministration cases only undermine the state’s role in addressing emergencies and building the required institutional capacity to contribute to South Africa’s long-sought developmental state. This suggests the need to build effective accountability structures capable of changing the country’s culture of corruption to ensure state resources improve the citizens’ socio-economic conditions.

If the inputs of subnational governments are well-considered and merged with enhanced participatory governance, the process could result in national governments adopting informed decisions based on utilizing information from grassroots levels represented by local governments. This could improve the prospects of building a capable and coherent developmental state based on effective coordination structures that promote agile responses and policies to the needs of different territories. Some Indian states (Rajasthan, Odisha and Kerala) were exemplary by promoting cross-sectoral and multi-scalar coordination among the different spheres of government in coordinating pandemic responses (Dutta and Fischer 2021). Some lessons from
the India and South Africa have the potential to address the culture of working in silos amongst the different spheres of government and also address the criticism that developmental states centralize power and take decisions without understanding local dynamics.

**Conclusion**

The vast literature on COVID-19 responses has been inundated with a significant focus on the role played by the state-national government in mitigating the social and economic impact associated with the pandemic and other emergencies. The focus has been on state-led measures such as lockdowns and stimulus packages and their overall effect on national economies. While the key focus has been on national government responses, there is a lack of literature on how subnational governments responded to the pandemic and the relationship with the national government. This is especially the case in developing nations, where state capacity deficits raise questions about the possibilities of local responses. Understanding and strengthening coordination between the various levels of government is key to building the institutional capacity of developing states to withstand crisis periods. This paper was concerned with the relationship between the central and local states in coordinating efforts to attenuate and respond to the pandemic, and the meaning of state-led responses for South Africa’s developmental state ambition.

The paper showed that the local government sphere in South Africa played an essential frontline role by providing basic services, PPEs, sanitizing public spaces, food parcels to the poor and vulnerable and formulating and implementing covid responses. In addition to targeting vulnerable communities to assist, this response consolidated the significance of the local government’s proximity and understanding of community needs. The level of coordination between the various spheres of government in South Africa in managing the pandemic is evidence of a societal approach that puts human development at the epicenter of responding to the pandemic. While contrast can be noted between responses in Cape Town and eThekwini’s COVID responses, the two case studies show how responses to the pandemic contribute to inequalities and undermine the country’s developmental state ambition. The varying degrees of effective responses between metropolitan municipalities and small-town and rural municipalities were influenced by the institutional and fiscal capacity of the two categories of municipalities. This implies the need for development approaches that prioritize small-town and rural municipalities’ institutional and financial capacity to build a capable local state to contribute to the country’s developmental state ambition.

While some success was noted in the coordinated responses to the pandemic, the failure to decentralize fiscal responses weakened local government responses. In this case, this failure is reflected in that subnational governments did not influence companies that needed to be funded despite being strategically positioned to have more information. Secondly, this was also evident in the funding requirements that excluded small businesses, particularly those in the informal economy. These disparities are sufficient to create a debate about the future of local governments in creating social policies that support impoverished communities despite their smaller share of the division of revenue. Cases of corruption also undermine the government’s effort to build strong, resilient, and accountable institutions.

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