'COVID was a rupture... we could not run [away from it] and hide while people were concerned about where their next meal would come from.... people were panicking about a disease they did not know anything about, more than they were worried about sickness...'

'We are not a charity organisation. Food is not our thing, but we saw an opportunity [to demonstrate real solidarity]... so we reached out to people who were isolated... to see how they were doing and what their needs were...'

Background

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19, a state of disaster was declared in South Africa, and a nationwide lockdown was imposed. Two Pietermaritzburg based organisations, PACSA and CREATE-CBR came together to discuss how the communities they worked with would be affected. Through discussion with communities, the organisations realised that their mandate ‘to support communities in crisis’ has become a lot more important. Most of the people they worked with would not be able to protect themselves from the virus and its consequences because of a lack of access to services.

These organisations realised that they simply could not stand by while people were facing the crisis on their own. And so, they embarked on an intentional programme to provide households at risk with food, in a manner that reinforced their common values of building community and solidarity, and that defended the dignity of those households.
**Insights gained**

‘Don’t wait for funding... use what we have to get things done...’

Because we believe in social justice, we are compelled to act when the people we work with face challenges that impact on the dignity and wellbeing. Organisations must not be disabled by the lack of money to undertake formal activities. Do what you can with what you have in the moment when it is needed.

‘We went house to house – building people to people connections...’

It is important that despite the difficult conditions that we may do our work under, we maintain and strengthen our relationships with people. Human contact is important for building trust, reinforcing relationships and affirming our individual and collective dignity.

‘[To reduce conflict] our lists were verified through community partners.’
‘We visited households, verified the need and [only] then distributed parcels.’
‘We deliberately did not work with ‘political bodies’ - we worked through CCGs and local health workers.’

The success of our work is founded on a deep knowledge of the communities we work in and with. It is reinforced by our relationships of trust which in turn is built on being present and available to support other in their time of need.

‘We can’t work in silos’

We have to actively seek out relationships with other organisations and individuals in order to respond more effectively to the complex environment in which we work. By pooling our skills, resources, networks and knowledge we are better able to respond to the challenges encountered. Taking a solidarity position requires that we work in collaboration to amplify issues and to develop more workable and well-rounded responses that have the greatest potential for creating positive change in people’s lives.
‘[Through our collaboration] we were exposed to new issues [and] to other realities’

Because of the way our work is focussed on issues we are often not able to see or engage with the complexity of people lives. Working with other allows us to see and engage with issues perspectives that we are not always aware of, and in so doing, expand our ability to support people through the complex challenges they face.

‘I was critical of people who do food, but my goodness people are struggling... [basic needs] are necessary’

I softened my stance on food parcels... the fish helps as well [rather than only teaching to fish] ... fish is always needed somewhere’

It is important that we recognise the challenge that the ‘whole human being’ experiences. It is often true that before we can begin the work of consciousness raising or even education, that people’s base needs for food, shelter and security also have to be met. The work of affirming human dignity is made doubly difficult in contexts where people have to constantly struggle to survive.

‘We had to say no sometimes, it’s not possible to satisfy everyone, but we are comfortable with the selection criteria [we used]’

Integrity is critical. Being clear about what we do, why we do it and how we go about our work is important. Through a consistent and transparent practice, founded in our values, we are better able to build and maintain trust and be more effective in our work.
Questions for our practice of solidarity

During COVID civil society stepped into a gap that government and the private sector did not fill. In fact, one participant in conversation commented that civil society has ‘always had to fill the gap to preserve human dignity’ and went further to state that we have to ‘shift from this mode to make the government accountable to respond’. While organisations have the interests of the communities they serve at heart they cannot substitute for the state. **What should communities be doing to make their leaders more accountable for delivery?**

The demand for relief will be around for a while as the economy is affected and many more people are without an income. **What will this mean for our social justice work going forward?**

In times of crisis, when many people who do good want public acknowledgement, **how do we work in a manner that both brings immediate relief and support to our communities, and supports and affirms the dignity of those communities?** COVID has again highlighted how rural communities are often not considered. **What can organisations be doing to build urban/rural solidarity?**