



**24 MARCH 2020**

## **MEDIA STATEMENT**

To: All Editors

### **Re: Traditional Health Practitioners' response to COVID-19 and the Presidential Lockdown Announcement**

The South African National AIDS Council's (SANAC) Civil Society Forum and Traditional Health Practitioner's Sector (THP) supports and is committed to the announcement made by President Cyril Ramaphosa on 23 March 2020 to implement a national lockdown in response to the recent global COVID-19 pandemic. We highly commend the President for this decision and strongly feel that the lockdown is a necessity which will help manage and reduce casualties for all residents of South Africa.

However, the sector raises concern that there has been disregard for traditional health practitioners and healers as providers of healthcare. South Africa is a diverse and multi-cultural country and this very essence of our country must not be lost in the conversation and strategy in response to COVID-19. When communities need help, they approach traditional health practitioners and spiritual healers for assistance. Their role is vital and considering this we call the President and the Minister of health to take the following factors into consideration.

Firstly, the provisions are unclear on the mobilisation and movement of those who seek traditional medicine. There is an urgent need for clarity. Traditional medicine has proven to be effective against ailments and overlooking it is simply an infringement of the right to access to traditional healthcare and additionally the right to cultural and traditional practice. It is not clear to what extent traditional health practitioners will operate and what message they should be sharing with their communities on COVID-19. There is need for guidance on the handling of medicine and people who are infected by the virus. There are no criteria on how indigenous pharmacies or markets will run or be controlled. There is currently no vaccine for COVID-19 and spread of inaccurate information through social media is a danger to the public. Accurate information should be made available in indigenous languages and be also available in traditional medicinal markets.



Secondly, as the THP Sector we call on all traditional health practitioners, spiritual healers and all members of the sector to observe the established national Protocol throughout the country as a measure to combat COVID-19. We recognise the role of migrant healers providing these services and that they too heal members of their communities and they should be protected. We call on communities to co-operate by postponing or deferring all activities. Alternative methods that promote the health and wellbeing of communities must be taken. We also recognise women giving birth from home and the guidance needed to ensure their safety and the safety of their children. Traditional health practitioners are advised to use referrals to health facilities and in the case of emergencies, guidance and toolkits will be provided.

Thirdly, the recognition of indigenous medicine to treat the symptoms of COVID-19. Indigenous medicine that fight symptoms of the flu and fever are available. There should be channels to assist with access to well-known traditional medicine prescribed by traditional healers. We also recognise that it is important that all necessary precautions are taken including washing of hands with soap for 20 seconds and social distancing which must be adhered to.

Finally, we advise traditional leaders to postpone rituals, ceremonies, rites of passage and spiritual and traditional gatherings such as umemulo, umhlonyane, imbeleko, ukubuyisa ithongo, ukumisa amalada, imilindelo etc. This is also for the safety of yourselves, your initiates and your communities.

In light of the above, the THP sector is appealing to government and the President to formally recognise THP practitioners and healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For more information and for guidance contact:

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## **Traditional Health Practitioners (THP) COVID-19 Guidelines**

### Social Mobilisation

- Integrate existing programmes and projects of the THP Sector to support actions towards stopping the spread of COVID-19.
- THPs and Spiritual Healers must stand together and pray for the end of the spread of the virus.
- The Civil Society Forum is playing a prominent role in the fight against COVID-19 and encourage THPs and Spiritual Healers to suspend all cultural mass rituals such as ukuthomba, domba dance, imfukamo, amazila, imembulo, umemulo, umhlonyane, imbeleko, ukubuyisa ithongo, ukumisa amalada, imilindelo, etc. pending another announcement by the State President.
- THPs and spiritual healers must be incorporated in initiatives and empowered, thus, be provided with tools in their various constituencies, places of work and residence for screening and to make informed referrals to health facilities.
- Toolkits will be provided as a form of empowering THPs to fight COVID-19.
- THPs undertake to ensure and keep their ndumbas as clean as they can, because clients will visit them to consult.
- Information, Education and Communication material must be given to traditional health practitioners working with their organisations in order to ensure awareness and understanding of the symptoms of the virus and the Department of Health must please provide THPs with protection kits such as gloves, masks and hand sanitizers.
- The Sector is calling and campaigning to ensure that as part of the routine counselling to both peers and clients, frequent washing of hands is to be practiced, and communities should be educated on what is needed to curb the spread of the virus.
- Ensure a systematic referral approach between THPs and Health facilities coupled with a feedback system back to the referring THP.
- Build capacity to support THPs from all partners and sectors in order to ensure that communication and awareness by the sector is effective and successful as required.



- Lockdown, quarantine and other such measures to contain and combat the spread of COVID-19 should be carried out strictly and in accordance with human rights standards and in a way that is necessary and proportionate to the evaluated risk.