



#lovecompassionkindness

FOOD4LOVE is a movement, an action to love, be compassionate and kind. It was born out of the simple concept of feeding just for love. It grows because love is the best medicine on earth.

Final Report

In late March 2020 South Africa, with its multiple socio-economic challenges, faced a new disaster in the form of the Covid19 pandemic. President Cyril Ramaphosa invoked the Disaster Management Act (DMA) of 2002 which defines disaster as a progressive or sudden widespread or localised, natural or human-caused occurrence which causes or threatens to cause disruption of the life of a community; and is of a magnitude that exceeds the ability of those affected by the disaster to cope with its effects using only their own resources (shortened for relevance).

As mandated by the Act, Greater Hermanus had to initiate a disaster management plan envisaged in the law as a continuous and integrated multi-sectoral, multi-disciplinary process of planning and implementation of measures aimed at mitigating the severity or consequences of disasters; and hopefully post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation.

It is worth noting that the Overstrand in which Greater Hermanus lies, is the second-most populated local municipal area in the vast Western Cape with a 2018 population estimate of 104 985. Its population growth is estimated as the highest in the province for the foreseeable future according to the municipality's own Socio Economic Profile 2019, its most current. For local residents, the resource inequalities and frustrations with municipal indifference led to protracted and sometimes violent protest in 2018. When the pandemic struck in March 2020 this context was unchanged in any demonstrable way. Indeed, at a glance, population growth since 2018 seems to have accelerated beyond the census expectation as the tourism shine of Greater Hermanus continued to attract work seekers with its glimmer of hope and opportunity. In short, before Covid19, Greater Hermanus was not a comfortable or equitable community.

This report on food relief efforts since March 2020 reflects most sharply that to achieve a response on the scale envisaged by the DMA requires nothing less than a whole society approach. This is where Hermanus civilians voluntarily stepped up in ways we can be proud of and on which, with leadership and vision, we can build. It reflects just as starkly, however, lessons for our future about political and municipal leadership and vision in times of crisis.

Red Cross locally was tasked by National South African Red Cross to engage with the Disaster Management team of the Overstrand Municipality from the start, acting as an umbrella to Food4Love (F4L), a civil society movement that emerged rapidly in response to the Covid crisis and was without formal status. Since the first day of lockdown and for the following 11 months F4L ran a food scheme serving those in need among an estimated 110,000 people in Hermanus, Zwelihile, Mount Pleasant, Onrus, Vermont, Hawston and smaller outlying communities. It is estimated that over 1 million meals were provided. Funding was generated from the local community, Red Cross and some international donors. Red Cross managed these monies, made food payments and issued permits for travel and work during lockdown to over a 100 people working in the food relief field in Greater Hermanus.

One of the lessons learned in this process was the need for better record keeping. The unprecedented nature and scale of the disaster and the absence of leadership from the usual civil structures (municipal or local government) generated a collaborative "all hands on deck" spirit which neglected organizational discipline. Efforts were made to collect data and all money inputs/outputs were tracked closely by Red Cross but useful user and consumption data was not comprehensive. With hindsight this would have been foundational for a much-needed poverty assessment.



Food Relief Structures

Food4Love founder Natalie Munro, a Hermanus resident with no previous experience of what an emergency food program would entail, describes the spontaneous start-up: “The founding happened in a time of deep confusion and fear. It was clear what everyone needed most was love and kindness and of course real sustenance for those whose livelihoods had collapsed.” Munro worried too about the loneliness of isolation and during the 11-month period beginning with the first lockdown, F4L provided the bulk of food relief in Greater Hermanus and a sense of community for both volunteers and recipients. “Without the unwavering support and heart-lifting humanity of a dedicated team of volunteers, we couldn’t have achieved this,” said Munro. In the spirit of its founding F4L also cooperated with smaller food programs (see box1.)

Supplementing the foodstuffs F4L and others acquired with contributed funding, additional provisions came from local producers and farms. Biggest among these was a Ceres farmer who provided 97 pallets of carrots and onions over 11 months. These truckloads became a mainstay of the F4L food packs.

In September 2020 there was a surprise unilateral announcement that municipal funds supporting Overstrand soup kitchens would be “redirected” to “community vegetable gardens”. What had been a life line to as many as 10 000 people across Zwelihle, Mount Pleasant and Hawston alone disappeared with a mayoral stroke of the pen. Small community soup kitchens continued without municipal support where they could and F4L supported the RDP soup kitchen in Zwelihle which fed an average of 200 people a day.

Food packing

While soup and sandwiches (and 19 500 boiled eggs!) were always welcome, F4L determined early on that food inputs should not just be handouts but provide the basis for a family to feed itself. Under the guidance of Michael Bayer and Caroline Gabb volunteers crowded available shelters to prepare the packs for distribution. The family veg pack consisted of potatoes, onions and carrots with additional maize to provide 4 meals for a family. Weekly packages contained 20 portions. Additional gifted supplies often supplemented these packs. Pack numbers fluctuated monthly. In April 1200 4-meal and 60 week-meal packs a day jumped to 2500 and 120 respectively in May. Packing days fluctuated with need, too, as some people returned to jobs when lockdown levels eased. In all 1 054 000 meals were packed by around 125 volunteers at five different venues, three of them private homes. It was messy, a little chaotic and Covid protocols were in place. There is a documented count of each monthly packing output.

Distribution

F4L initially used volunteers to deliver food packs, paying their own fuel and airtime. Later, investment was made in a bakkie and fuel funded. For the duration of the effort, food distribution was managed by just one person, William Ntebe, an indispensable member of the F4L team with deep knowledge of the community from which he built a team of local volunteers on site across Greater Hermanus. This network provided oversight and feedback that food was reaching those in real need and that no exploitation was creeping into the system. On the very few occasions when conflict threatened, F4L applied its founding rule that food would be delivered only where there was peace, kindness and no interference. Delivery was withheld just once. The local police committed to provide protection during distribution if needed.



Conclusions

The 11 months proved to be both hard work and an invigorating example of an extraordinary and generous civilian response both in kind and through funding. At the municipality the Disaster Management team was tasked with leading the response effort and implementing what is envisioned in the DMA. One of our biggest lessons is surely that tasking has to be fit for purpose. Until now our DM teams have honed their much-valued skills in fire management and response in the Overstrand, where this was reliably the greatest challenge prior to March 2020. The DM team was helpful and there were ongoing meetings between them and councillors and voluntary organizations but food relief was a new ball game and municipal leadership failed to recognize or manage this. In addition while F4L confesses fully to its data management inadequacies, mapping and data collection by the municipality was totally inadequate.

As we think about what next, our greater lesson as civil society has to be a recognition that our official structures failed us entirely with respect to leadership. And we need to plan for that vacuum in future. While there was demonstrable political leadership and some guidance at state and provincial level, our local leaders were on mute. As civil society we can be proud that we muddled through. But we cannot be comforted.

Many organizations and individuals across Greater Hermanus responded to community needs. This included registered organisations, community groups, faith-based organizations and caring residents, some of whom created a WhatsApp group to alert people to different needs such as bedding, clothing and simple inputs like soap and nappies. Supermarket trolley drives collected both dry foodstuffs and basic necessities for delivery to packing stations. Below is an imperfect list of contributors:

- Relief Life at Shofar Church: dry food packs to listed SASSA recipients;
- Eat Restaurant: responded to needs in broader Hermanus area;
- Rotary: hygiene essentials;
- Hermanus Staam Saam: supported 750 people a month;
- Hermanus Islamic Society: 120 portions of biryani 3 times a week;
- Diensentrum: Meals on Wheels to about 50 people a month;
- Volmoed: soup and bread weekly to 80 people in Tesserlaarsdal;
- United Church: ongoing support to RDP soup kitchen;
- Just Care: soup mix to about 150 families a week;
- Moffat Hall: a shelter created at the start of the pandemic in the absence of any homeless structures in the Overstrand. Food relief from several sources was provided but the municipality shut this down in September. There are now no homeless shelters in the Overstrand.
- Overstrand Soup Kitchens: approximately 45, funded by the municipality, but unilaterally defunded in September.

The Path Ahead

We appreciate that feeding cannot be a long-term solution. The timing of the exit and the nature of the schemes that will replace feeding are critical to satisfactory outcomes. So, too, is community support and commitment. In regard to hopefully post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation envisaged in the DMA definition cited earlier, we list a number of interventions and associated cautions.

*Any food-growing scheme, as announced in September last year with the closure of all soup kitchens, needs to begin with community consultation. It must also be underpinned by feasibility research to include a realization time scale, seasonality, spatial aspects, soil suitability and input requirements, costs and funding availability. Failed food garden schemes across the country, including Zwelihle itself, all underline the fact that a bright idea planted today does not feed a mouth tomorrow.

*Urgent now is a thorough poverty assessment to understand the economic impacts of the pandemic and pre-existing conditions and deep inequalities that were unaddressed before the pandemic.

*Food4Love has written a proposal for a Veg House in collaboration with the Hermanus Varsity Trust. This awaits Town Planning approval and further funding. The initiative aims to teach and mentor potential gardeners which is essential if community garden schemes are to work. Not to be overlooked as a resource is the significant farming community of the Overstrand's Hemel en Aarde Valley which has a wealth of farming wisdom and big hearts in the future of this beautiful region.

*Collecting and mapping data is imperative. Food4Love took part in a food survey in November. As reported above, from the beginning of the COVID pandemic, large numbers of food parcels and meals have been distributed in and around Hermanus. It would be good if there was a common collection tool and process. The November survey has provided an opportunity for a number of people to learn digital skills using cell phones. This work continues in SharpDigital, a NPO in Zwelihle and further collaboration may indeed be feasible with HVT and its training of young local people.

A final word

Firstly a huge thank you for all the voluntary work undertaken and the generous funding given.

With this invigorating experience of local community top of mind we urge Overstrand leadership to really appreciate the value of this special resource and to find its own voice of compassion. It must urgently demonstrate that the community is seen and heard. It must make a trustworthy commitment to broad consultation about what happens in the Overstrand. A vision for the Overstrand is only possible if everyone feels a part of it. The pandemic definitively ends the outdated notion that Hermanus is an affluent town with a dormitory settlement of service workers. It is one town, one village. It has one road running through it that we all share.

Angela Heslop, Natalie Munro and William Ntebe

South African Red Cross Hermanus Branch
Covid 19 Food Relief Project
March 2020 to February 2021

Donations received R1 141 654

Allocations:

Food	R795 974
Admin and distribution	R14 043
Capital item (vehicle)	R40 000
Total expenses	R850 017
Funds on hand 28-02-21*	R291 637



(*Our commitment is that remaining monies be used to support projects and initiatives designed in broad consultation to build community sustainability.)

