

## Learning from the Pandemic: Structural Implications of Food Parcel Distribution Scheme in South Africa

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### Abstract

The lack of inclusive governance and collaboration among various stakeholders and institutions to develop long-term strategies to alleviate food insecurity is an emerging pandemic during times of distress. The study aims to develop an anti-corruption mechanism (food distribution aptitude for eligibility) that can remedy the structural implications of food parcel corruption during a pandemic. A qualitative exploratory review approach was adopted in the study. The reviewed studies revealed that the currently existing systems of food distribution failed due to poor recipient identification and vetting, systems manipulation by officials, lack of tracking devices during distribution, and ghost recipients. The study concludes that the divisions, bureaucracy, maladministration, and corruption revealed in the literature about the government have adversely impacted the welfare of the vulnerable and marginalized groups who reside in the informal settlements. Those in need of food parcels suffer at the hands of corrupt officials and their family members due to an unmonitored distribution scheme. The study model is expected to assist non-profit organizations, and government initiatives in selecting worthy beneficiaries during and post pandemics. The model is also expected to assist in removing the potential ills of the system, minimize system manipulation and corruption, and ensure transparency during food parcel distribution to the needy in times of distress.

**Keywords:** Food distribution scheme; anti-corruption mechanism; local market support; Covid-19; maladministration.

### Abstrak

Kurangnya tata kelola inklusif dan kolaborasi di antara berbagai pemangku kepentingan dan lembaga untuk mengembangkan strategi jangka panjang untuk mengurangi kerawanan pangan adalah pandemi yang muncul selama masa-masa sulit. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengembangkan mekanisme anti-korupsi (bakat distribusi makanan untuk kelayakan) yang dapat memperbaiki implikasi struktural dari korupsi paket makanan selama pandemi. Pendekatan tinjauan eksplorasi kualitatif diadopsi dalam penelitian ini. Studi yang ditinjau mengungkapkan bahwa sistem distribusi makanan yang ada saat ini gagal karena identifikasi dan pemeriksaan penerima yang buruk, manipulasi sistem oleh pejabat, kurangnya alat pelacak selama distribusi, dan penerima hantu. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa perpecahan, birokrasi, maladministrasi dan korupsi yang terungkap dalam literatur di kalangan pemerintah telah berdampak buruk terhadap kesejahteraan kelompok rentan dan terpinggirkan yang tinggal di permukiman informal. Mereka yang membutuhkan paket makanan menderita di tangan pejabat korup dan anggota keluarga

mereka karena skema distribusi yang tidak dipantau. Model studi ini diharapkan dapat membantu organisasi nirlaba, dan inisiatif pemerintah dalam memilih penerima manfaat yang layak selama dan pasca pandemi. Model ini juga diharapkan dapat membantu menghilangkan potensi penyakit sistem, meminimalkan manipulasi dan korupsi sistem, dan memastikan transparansi selama distribusi paket makanan kepada yang membutuhkan pada saat kesulitan.

**Kata kunci:** Skema distribusi pangan; mekanisme antikorupsi; dukungan pasar lokal; Covid-19; maladministrasi.

## INTRODUCTION

The first case of coronavirus (COVID-19) was identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China (Zhou et al., 2020) and the deadly disease spread rapidly throughout the world (Bogoch et al., 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic (WHO, 2020). In response to the surge of the pandemic, many developed and developing countries imposed public health measures such as lockdowns, closures of businesses and schools, banning public gatherings, use of face-mask and quarantines to control the spread of the virus (Hartley & Perencevich, 2020; Imtyaz et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2022). These impediments had adverse social and economic consequences, which propelled governments mostly in developing countries including South Africa to find counter-proactive measures, to alleviate the consequences (Devereux, 2021). In South Africa, this situation needed urgent responsiveness to safeguard the vulnerable communities who have been hit hard by the restrictions due to their limited access to necessities and essentials such as sufficient food and water, functioning toilets and sewers, adequate drainage, waste collection services, and planned housing amongst others (Corburn et al., 2020).

The local authorities arranged emergency food parcels for those unable to access food supplies and the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) developed criteria for beneficiaries of food parcels (Mbhense, 2020). The aptitude for eligibility criteria included: the family being child-headed, single parents with no means of income, and elderly persons living without help. families where no one was employed, or families where the one person who was working was not getting paid due to lockdown restrictions. However, this initiative was marred with corruption and manipulation of the system by officials (Hartley & Perencevich, 2020; Mudau, 2022). Studies conducted on the Covid-19 food parcel distribution scheme and social reliefs have exposed the delimiting factors which include government unpreparedness, corruption, maladministration, and social and economic factors amongst others (Hartley & Perencevich, 2020; Imtyaz et al., 2020; Mbhense, 2020; Devereux, 2021; Hart et al., 2022; Mudau, 2022).

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMUNITY, PROBLEMS AND TARGET SOLUTIONS

The structural implications of food parcel corruption exposed the limitations of the government in the fight against corruption and food insecurity during times of distress. Preventing this through the adoption of anti-corruption mechanisms for checking eligibility would enhance measures geared towards fulfilling the distribution of food parcels to deserving poor people (Hartley & Perencevich, 2020; Mudau, 2022).

**Problem**

However, the gap in how corruption in food parcel distribution schemes can be tackled abounds. Addressing the reticence can assist in easing food insecurity during times of distress. The lack of corruption-free mechanisms to address the inefficiencies birthed by COVID-19 food parcel schemes shows that coordination of the food parcel distribution initiative lacks proper course, transparency, and accountability.

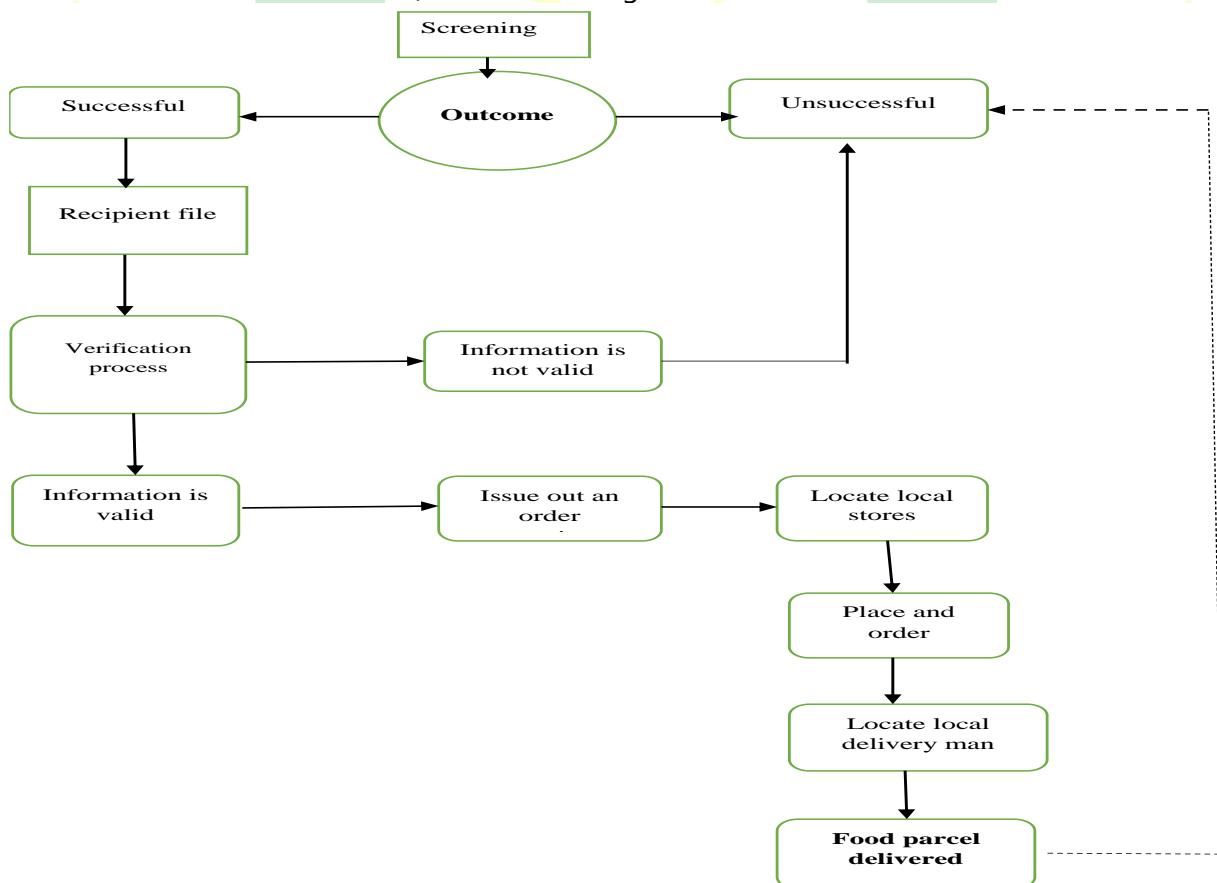
**Target solution**

This study, therefore, provides a robust anti-corruption paradigm for checking the eligibility of food parcels and distribution to vulnerable and marginalized groups in informal settlements and beyond. The shortcomings and constraints of government and ordeals of corrupt officials in attempts to distribute the parcels are questioned in this study.

**METHOD**

**Strategies to deal with the distribution of food parcels to needy communities**

The researcher developed the aptitude for eligibility and distribution of food parcels in consultation with various literature reviews (Bogoch et al., 2020; Hartley & Perencevich, 2020; Imtyaz et al., 2020; Mbhense, 2020; Devereux, 2021; Corburn et al., 2020; Mudau, 2022; Adithya et al., 2017; Al Abid & Karim, 2017) illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. 1:** Aptitude for eligibility of food parcels and distribution to the needy

**Application process:** The process for applying has several stages. The initial stage of the process starts with the screening of the applicant (a person applying for food parcels). The screening of the beneficiaries of food parcels is recurring, since some recipients' statuses (i.e. jobs and earnings) can change without the recipients reporting to the authorities as highlighted by the dashed lines. The age restriction for applying for the food parcels is 18 years or older when the applicant applies personally. Furthermore, no more than two people from the same household can apply to avoid multiple distributions to the same address. In the case of child-headed families or the applicant is less than the recommended age, a sworn oath and involvement of social workers could be required to proceed with the application. Other criteria for processing the application include only permanent South African citizens.

Background details of the applicant are checked, which include name(s) and surname; identity number; location of the applicant; employment status, and income statement (if no income an affidavit is required). Though it is expected, that most deserving applicants would write 'unemployed', it allows the system to update when changes occur. The applicant or recipient can at any stage be removed from the scheme when the status changes according to the eligibility criteria. Anyone who provides an employment status that warrants ineligibility is also rejected. Those who write about what they do not do, such as 'unemployed' when they are properly or partially employed, would be defrauding the system deliberately and are rejected (Mbhense, 2020). They could also be charged with attempted fraud. Income statements should be required for those who are employed but are categorized as low earners, and affidavits (or employment termination letters) for those who lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since all applicants' information will be available in the government database, some of the false information can be traced and reported, and the application is immediately rejected. Family members living in the same household will be linked because of the available information on the government's database classifying their association and census reports.

**Application status:** The application status can emerge with one of the two possible outcomes apart from those that require additional information or documentation to complete the application. The two outcomes are a success or unsuccessful/rejection. An unsuccessful application is when the applicant does not meet the minimum requirements to qualify for the food parcel scheme.

Cases also include the applicants who tried to cheat the system by faking some of the information. A blacklist of cheaters can be established and criminal charges laid in respect of their cases. This step is important because there have been millions of money wasted on the allocation of multiple cheaters who benefitted from the system when they did not deserve it, while many others who were deserving did not receive their parcels. Moreover, tracking is necessary, however, in the past, it was not possible because cheaters closed the options to be identified. The step is also important as in some cases, there can be ways to recover funds lost due to the cheaters of the system.

The successful application can only be said to be preliminary since at every stage there will be monitoring and evaluation to ensure the accuracy of the process. Once the application is deemed to be successful and all information has been correctly verified, the applicant's information is stored in the food parcel scheme database. This information can be accessed by any facilitator of the food parcels initiative, and by the public for transparency of the system. If at any stage a

successful applicant is found to have successfully cheated the system, a new decision of unsuccessful is made in respect of that application, and penalties should apply.

A successful application should ordinarily proceed to the next stage as outlined below:

**File display repository:** This is where all the successful applicants' details are stored, and then made accessible to the public. That is, every citizen can have access to the system to view who has applied for the food parcels, giving a chance to deserving people to indicate if they were omitted by mistake, and enhancing minimization of corruption and misuse of funds because cheaters would not want to be displayed in public because other people would identify and probably report them. Duplicates as a result of both human and system errors would be easily identified to avoid multiple order placement. Whistleblowers will also be solicited to report undue recipients that they know, and a system for doing so shall be provided even for those whistleblowers willing to remain anonymous.

**Recipient file:** Once the successful applicants have been registered, then the order is processed.

**Order process:** At this step, the order file is opened for all successful applicants, and is officially labeled as recipients of the food parcels. The order consists of the grocery basket, which the government and private donors are giving to those affected by the pandemic. All the food parcels carry the same contents, and due to this standardization, the recipients become familiar with the type of items they will receive (Adithya et al., 2017; Mudau, 2022). Suitable stores closest to the recipients will be packaging the food parcels, and local transport will be used where deliveries are required.

**Order placement:** The order can be placed once the applicant has filled in the required information that is stored by the system. Different systems for online food ordering exist such as, Take a Lot, Amazon, and Alibaba among others (Adithya et al., 2017; Al Abid & Karim, 2017; Chavan et al., 2015; Kapoor & Vij, 2018; Reddy et al., 2016). However, they all follow the same principles. Unique identifications and passwords are given to customers for tracing their food parcels. All successful applicants should verify that the details entered are correct before the delivery is made, including the delivery address. This shows that all the systems using call-and-delivery follow similar methods.

**Precautions to be upheld:** When suspicions of cheating are being suspected, free telephone lines could be reserved for reporting. This can also help in cases where working people are seen receiving parcels meant for the unemployed and poor families. Whistleblowing can be worthwhile to serve throughout the process. Police presence, together with security guards, should be involved to authenticate recipients for the protection of delivery personnel and to minimize food heists and ghost applicants.

**Case of incorrect address:** The case of wrong address may be due to attempts to cheat the system, as it has happened in the past with officials sometimes creating fake addresses. However, errors may occur and should be corrected where they occur, but not when delivery has already reached a destination. In the case of wrong addresses, deliveries should be withheld until verification has been made, but not at the harm of an innocent recipient. This section explains what happens when the location or address is wrong. If the address is wrong, the driver who is delivering the food parcel should not offload the food parcel. The order should be returned and the process should restart to avoid food heists, ghost applicants, and cheating.

**Enhancing successful delivery:** To ensure the success of the delivery, government officials or staff should call the applicant before the delivery and upon receiving the message that the order was delivered successfully to ensure that the correct items were delivered to them. Recipients should be required to produce proper identification (ID) photos with their photographs before receiving the food parcel.

**Health compliance:** To comply with the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) COVID-19 regulations, delivery vehicles, and the driver should sanitize the vehicle first before dispatching the food parcel. Upon delivering the food parcel, the drivers should also remove the items themselves to avoid contact with the applicant. All these should occur only on police and security escorts, and together with the driver, the team (driver, police & security) should first verify the identity of the recipients.

**Tracking and tracing of food parcels:** All food parcels should have a tracking number available to the applicant. Tracking should be applied to the merchandise (Tarafdar et al., 2013). Text messages may be used to notify the applicants of the whereabouts of their food parcel, and also when there are any delays or complications to avoid frustrations and complaints. Users do not need to be signed up to use the application, as seen with various retailer applications for doing grocery online.

**Security system:** South Africa has experienced cash-in-transit heists where money was being delivered to banks and the recipients of monetary grants and pensioners (Baraka & Murimi, 2021; Mafumbabete et al., 2019; Hiropoulos & Porter, 2014; Hosken, 2018). There have also been thefts of foodstuffs for school children by teachers and officials from the Departments of Education. Moreover, officials who were supposed to deliver the same food parcels in this study were also found to have stolen the food in some areas. As a result, people in the system may be eyeing to find ways to rob the chain at some point, including food parcel heists, as these are used as stock for grocery shops. There should be tough police security throughout the system to safeguard the system and arrest those attempting crime around it.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study identified the deficiencies of the food parcel distribution schemes. The deficiencies include corruption, maladministration, ghost recipients, and system manipulation amongst others. The study also pinpointed the lack of technology in the distribution of food parcels which rendered monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the system inadequate. The reasons for technology deficiency might be due to ineffective food value chain nodes (i.e. inputs and production, processing and storage, transportation, and distribution, amongst others). In (de Rooij & Verweij, 2020) City Region Food Systems (CFRS) was reported as an efficient toolkit to better under the supply and demand within the regions in a country and map a way forward to assist the needy during hard times. The manual approach to distributing food parcels as reported by (Mudau, 2022) has exposed corruption, fraud, and ghost recipients as some of the weaknesses of the COVID-19 food parcel distribution. The aptitude for eligibility models that the study proposed can assist in identifying the correct beneficiaries fittingly and can be validated for having done so. This is contrary to the existing model (Hart et al., 2022; Imtyaz et al., 2020; Mbhense, 2020), which

could not verify whether recipients were deserving of food parcels or not, and the models were easily manipulated by the officials and marred by corruption.

Concerning corruption and maladministration, the current COVID-19 and existing mechanisms have shown deficiencies due to undeserving recipients and friends of the officials benefiting from the food parcel scheme (Mudau, 2022). The premature withdrawal of the covid-19 relief measures including food parcels as a result of the looting of funds and food parcels amongst others has aggravated the hardships on poorer communities who had job slumps and exposed the inefficiencies of the government (Visagie & Turok, 2021; Mahlangu, 2020a; Mahlangu, 2020b; Simpson, 2020; Jones et al., 2020). Digitalization of food parcels in South Africa will assist in remedying the already observed inefficiencies of the manual systems, the use of artificial intelligence in minimizing corruption and inefficiencies can be observed in the e-commerce fraternity (Adithya et al., 2017; Al Abid & Karim, 2017; Chavan et al., 2015). An adoption of the aptitude for eligibility of food parcels will assist governments in mitigating the widened pre-existing inequality amongst the poorest of the poor in rural areas, and the rich. This can be achieved through job creation and other relief measures that will boost the economy and alleviate poverty and unemployment.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study provided a robust anti-corruption aptitude for the eligibility of food parcels to the vulnerable and marginalized groups in informal settlements and beyond. The shortcomings and constraints of government officials in attempts to distribute the parcels were definitively addressed and this includes, corruption, fraud, selling food parcels for self-enrichment, and system manipulation. The current existing paradigms of food distribution failed due to the inefficiencies aforementioned. As a result, this perpetuated a robust approach to remedy the current predicaments of the system. The study concludes that the divisions, bureaucracy, maladministration, and corruption revealed in the literature about the government have adversely impacted the welfare of the vulnerable and marginalized groups who reside in the informal settlements. Those in need of food parcels suffer at the hands of corrupt officials and their family members due to an unmonitored distribution scheme. The study model is expected to assist non-profit organizations, and government initiatives in selecting worthy beneficiaries during and post pandemics. The model is also expected to assist in removing the potential ills of the system, minimize system manipulation and corruption, and ensure transparency during food parcel distribution to the needy in times of distress.

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