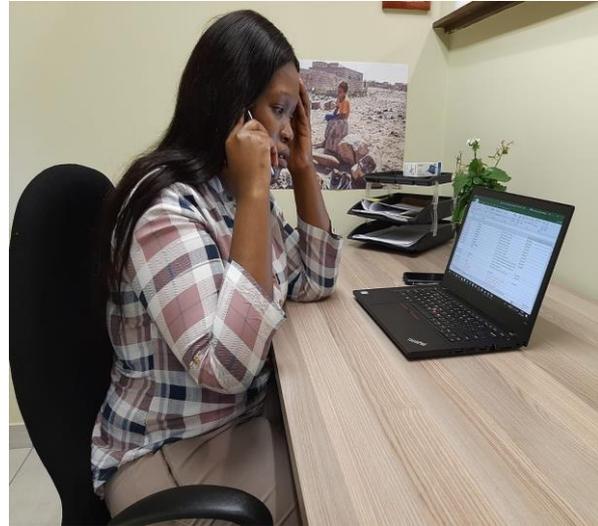


Creating Community Change



My phone rang, and when I picked up, I could immediately hear children crying in the background. I froze, and the trembling voice of a woman begged for my help.

“Sister, please do something; my children are dying of hunger. I used to work in a salon, but now I have no money for rent and food. This morning, the landlord gave us a final warning and said that if we don’t pay we are going to the streets,” she said.

It was May 2020, a few weeks after South Africa’s president announced the national lockdown in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the first time, I felt so challenged. I could not do anything to help this mother and her children, or any of the many others who called me during those lockdown months, and I have never felt so helpless. I had never questioned my capabilities at work before.

During lockdown, people were restricted from working and had no sources of income or food for themselves or their families. They approached my colleagues and me in great numbers, seeking assistance for their most basic needs. I could feel the desperation in their voices and the hunger they experienced.

I called our partner organizations, but received various responses such as, “We do not help migrants,” or, “We have run out of funding,” or “Your community does not meet our criteria or requirements.” At the time, our beneficiaries looked at me with hopeful eyes, but I could do nothing. They had to return home hungry. Knowing that children were going to sleep on empty stomachs caused me sleepless nights that hurt to the bone.

I could not just stand by and watch the situation. I had to do something, but all the doors that I knocked on seemed to shut in front of my eyes. I found a nearby church that was willing to provide donations, but at the time, food donations were restricted due to COVID-19 safety protocols. I questioned whether I was actually making a difference in the community. I felt defeated. I asked myself, how can a professional like me go home to warmth and safety, when a whole community of refugees and migrants were going to sleep hungry and cold?

I couldn't just stand by and watch people go hungry. I had to keep pushing. I kept asking for help, even when my voice was shaky. Finally, my colleagues started to hear my cry, and the cry of the migrant community. We explored different options until we found a donor who volunteered to help the most affected families. Restrictions eased, and as more donations came in, it felt like the clouds were breaking after the darkest storm. People were able to eat again. We secured food that would sustain them until the end of 2020, with hope that they will be able to return to work soon and stand on their feet again.

Although food security is an ongoing problem, I managed to find a temporary solution. I worry about how to find a sustainable way forward, though, as food is the basis of all human life and dignity. We owe it to our fellow humans to find an answer, and my hope is that in time, we will come together to do this. Until then, I will keep pushing where I can, to help this mother, her children and all the other migrants in my community.

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