



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



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| Date: | 17 May 2021 | | |
| To: | Minister ZL Mkhize, Honorable Minister of Health | From: | Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on COVID-19 |

**INDEPENDENT ELECTORAL COMMISSION (IEC) REQUEST FOR INPUTS
REGARDING SCHEDULING OF THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS**

Problem Statement

The IEC has been asked to consider postponing the upcoming municipal elections scheduled for 27th October 2021. A meeting was held by the IEC on Thursday 22nd April 2021 with stakeholders to discuss this. The Minister of Health has been asked by the IEC to give input on the health-related implications to holding the municipal elections as scheduled.

Implications

There are 3 health-related concerns regarding holding the municipal elections as scheduled:

1. The country may be experiencing a high number of COVID-19 cases or a rise in cases may be detected at the time of the elections or in the run-up to the elections necessitating a postponement of the elections at the last minute.
2. The holding of the elections could put members of the public at risk of contracting COVID-19 during one of various activities, such as:
 - o Voter registration with the anticipated need to facilitate large numbers of citizens in voter registration stations;
 - o The voting process itself, where large numbers gather at polling stations and queue to complete their ballots;
 - o Large political gatherings, especially in venues that are difficult to manage or limit (such as sports stadia); these are potentially high risk super-spreading events;
 - o Increased person-to-person contact during door-to-door campaigning.
3. The rollout of the vaccine program may not have reached sufficient people to have achieved population protection, or even protection of higher risk populations.

It would be difficult to manage or limit participation as well as ensure NPIs are adhered to in mass events.

Background/Current Information

1. The South African COVID-19 Modelling Consortium has developed possible 3rd wave scenarios, which have been presented to the Minister and MAC¹. In brief:
 - The timing of a third wave is not predictable, though the time from an initial increase in cases to the peak is on average 2-3 months.
 - In the absence of a new variant, the peak of a 3rd wave is likely to be lower than the peak of the 2nd wave across all age groups and most provinces, though there is substantial uncertainty. The behavioral response of the population to increasing case numbers will be a key determinant of the severity of a 3rd wave.
 - The emergence of new variants is unpredictable. A new variant could produce a 3rd wave that meets or exceeds the levels of the 2nd wave.
2. The vaccine rollout program is expected to have reached all healthcare workers and people of 60 years of age or older by the end of July 2021. The program will be in the process of vaccinating members of the general public who are older than 50 years of age (by end August 2021), 40 years of age (by mid-October 2021) as well as workers aged 40 years or older. It is expected that people in congregate settings will be included in this process. The rollout is expected to move to vaccinating the rest of the population (18 years or older) in October 2021. This information is as per the National Department of Health implementation plan as presented to the MAC on 15th April 2021 and implementation plans may change². In addition, there is a possibility of disruptions in the supply of either of the two vaccines.
3. Limitations on the size of gatherings is one of the most effective measures to reduce SARS-CoV-2 transmission. Brauner *et al.* estimated that restricting gatherings to 100 people or less resulted in a 34% reduction in transmission³. Political rallies and similar gatherings generally include far greater numbers of people with less likelihood of maintaining adherence to NPIs.
4. Current Level 1 restrictions allow for: “Social, political and cultural gatherings are permitted but limited to 250 persons or less for indoor venues and 500 persons or less for outdoor venues and if the venue is too small to hold the prescribed number of persons observing a distance of at least one and a half metres from each other then not more than 50 percent of the capacity of the venue may be used, subject to strict adherence to all health protocols and social distancing measures”⁴.
5. Municipal Elections were held in November 2020 and April 2021 where COVID-19 protocols were in place and implemented by the IEC. These were catch-up elections and involved only 455 and 14 elections respectively³.
6. The proposed elections in October 2021 are anticipated to include 4 725 unique elections, comprising 4 468 ward elections, eight metropolitan council elections, 205 local council elections and 44 district council elections⁵.

Recommendations

1. Any decision to delay the elections should take into consideration the uncertainty around the timing and magnitude of the potential Third Wave. It is not possible to predict the number of cases in the months leading up to the elections or at the time of the elections with the current Third Wave modelling estimates. It is also not possible to state with certainty what the epidemic situation will look like at potential future dates if voting is postponed.
2. The Alert Level regulations are intended to protect the health of the population. Although the regulations may change in response to the epidemic situation, political gatherings

must be subject to the same restrictions as other gatherings, and the restrictions should be enforced consistently.

3. COVID-19 protocols were developed and implemented to facilitate the municipal elections in November 2020. These protocols should be reviewed to ensure they are adhered to and implemented during the election process at campaign events and at voting stations.
4. Consider spreading out the voter registration weekends so as to ensure strict compliance with COVID-19 preventions protocols coupled with targeted public messages advising citizens on how to safely participate in different stages of the electoral processes irrespective of the current alert level.
5. Efforts should continue to be made to insist on, and enforce, ventilation, social distancing, sanitising of hands, use of masks, and other NPIs in any indoor and outdoor settings. This should also include emphasis on contact tracing, quarantine and isolation where required.
6. Continued communication regarding the requirement for people to still adhere to all the NPIs and regulations, irrespective of whether a member of the public has been vaccinated or not.

Footnotes:

1. As per Third Wave Modelling presented to the MAC on 8th April 2021.
2. As per presentation to the MAC by Dr Bamford, NDoH on COVID-19 vaccination rollout. 15th April 2021
3. J. M. Brauner *et al.*, *Science* 10.1126/science.abd9338 (2020).
4. Mail and Guardian, Local government elections: COVID-19 add to IEC's challenges. 16 March 2021
5. Adjusted Alert Level 1 restrictions as per regulation 72.3(ii) – 30 March 2021.

Thank you for consideration of this request.

Kind regards,



PROF MARIAN JACOBS



PROF KOLEKA MLISANA

CO-CHAIR CHAIRPERSONS: MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON COVID-19

DATE: 17 May 2021

CC:

- » **Dr S Buthelezi (Director-General)**
- » **Dr T Pillay (Deputy Director-General)**
- » **Incident Management Team**