

# 6 principles that helped Sanzaf navigate the Covid-19 pandemic

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The past two years will forever be etched in our minds as a period of great uncertainty, anxiety, disruption, and even panic. The global Covid-19 pandemic has tested communities, businesses, governments and also not-for-profit organisations in how they are able to continue delivering a vital service whilst providing the necessary support to staff, ensuring operational efficiency and importantly, sustainability of their operations.



Yasmina Francke, CEO of the South African National Zakáh Fund

The South African National Zakáh Fund (Sanzaf), like many other NPOs, was impacted by the pandemic and tested on a number of fronts. Thankfully, the organisation has been able to weather the storm, mostly due to a number of fundamental principles engrained in the ethos of the organisation which stood us in good stead during this challenging time.

Here are some of these principles which helped us navigate the past two years, and hopefully will carry us through what still lies ahead as we proceed with optimism and a belief that the end is in sight.

## 1. Clarity of purpose

When facing an unprecedented challenge where there is no blueprint or roadmap to the solution, it becomes important to remain focused on the vision, mission, values and purpose of the organisation. Clarity of purpose anchors the ship and steadies it amidst the tumultuous seas, provides direction, informs decisions and creates a sense of calm when there is so much uncertainty around.

At the initial stages of the lockdown when the team came together to strategise the way forward, it was extremely helpful and empowering to launch the organisation's response plan on the strength of our well-articulated statement of purpose.

## 2. Management responsiveness

As the reality of the pandemic started to reach South Africa a few months after the world first became aware of it, it was clear that we could not wait for a full set of facts to emerge before determining what to do. Sanzaf management immediately refocused the organisation's strategic objectives on the immediate needs which became quite clear in the first two weeks of the hard lockdown in March 2020. As more information and insights emerged, we continued to re-assess the situation and, where needed, amended our approach.

Creating a narrative in the organisation that the situation is fluid and that we will be required to adapt and respond as circumstances demand, was a great advantage. The entire Sanzaf team was open to the concept of 'adapting whilst running' – as long as they could see that our service to the various communities was true to our mandate and the organisation's values.

## 3. Operating principles

The need for immediate action can very easily conflict with the organisation's traditional accountability mechanism.

Our internal protocols are well entrenched and are an integral part of the organisation's governance practices. In responding to the humanitarian needs, there was a conscious effort to find the balance between adhering to the required bureaucracy and being able to respond timeously whilst still remaining true to our values of transparency and accountability.

With Sanzaf's management practices in respect of finance, human resources, distribution, funding and marketing being well-entrenched in its operating methodology, it meant that the back-end could cope with a sudden change in the environment and the team became very creative about how to stick to protocols whilst prioritising the human suffering.

## 4. Effective communication

Many stakeholders needed to be engaged in this process: the Sanzaf trustees, the board, the team, donors and, importantly, individuals and communities in need.

Internally, the team was armed with all the necessary protocols relating to the safety measures in protecting themselves and others from the virus. Regional heads received a toolkit for managing their respective offices as new realities emerged – such as working from home, social distancing and contact tracing.

Importantly also, the board received multiple updates on a weekly basis.

In addition, donors were kept informed of our efforts and our outreach programmes and notifications were put out to the public on how to access assistance during the lockdown. All digital platforms were activated as the world raced to embrace technology.

All of this sent a strong message that Sanzaf was open and functioning. It also engendered a sense of pride amongst the team, knowing that we were able to help at a time when many were helpless. It also attracted donors, offering financial assistance as well as donating in kind.

## 5. Partnerships and collaborations

Dealing with a humanitarian crisis where the entire population was affected required a collective response. It was clear that the situation demanded an 'all-hands-on-deck' approach. However, when this happens, there is always the challenge of duplication of efforts.

Sanzaf adopted a collaborative approach and sought partnerships with other community organisations, family trusts, corporates and local government. The organisation expressed the view that such collaborations needed to be purposeful, deliberate and structured, with the sole purpose of providing South Africans with the means to a dignified existence.

To this end, we partnered with various entities in the public and private sectors in different parts of the country and this helped to strengthen the humanitarian response to the pandemic.



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## 6. Team wellbeing

The wellbeing of our team remains a key priority for us. Not only was our team thrust into the 'front-line' by facing the pandemic with every home visit and every hamper distribution, but they too had families and loved ones impacted by the crisis.

Sanzaf remained 'open' throughout the lockdown, even though many of our offices were closed to the public. The team operated from warehouses, from their homes and from partners' facilities. Throughout this difficult time, Sanzaf invested significantly to ensure that the necessary PPE was provided and that the team would be safe whilst delivering aid – which was often life-saving.

Sadly, Sanzaf lost a few team members to the pandemic and the necessary support is always in place to take care of surviving family members whilst also providing for the wellbeing of colleagues.

Being fairly flexible during this period with regards to working hours, working environment and keeping the team updated regularly certainly helped to build the team spirit.

## Conclusion

Covid-19 catapulted the non-profit sector into unfamiliar territory, but it provided us with a great opportunity to work on our organisational fundamentals including strategy, planning, policies and governance to ensure that we operate more effectively in the future.

Importantly, it provided us with the opportunity to gain trust from our various stakeholders in delivering an extremely vital service to humanity at a time when other aid structures may have been hamstrung.

There is no doubt that we have a huge task ahead of us in rebuilding our nation. The NPO sector has earned its right to be a formidable force in this rejuvenation.

*This article first appeared in the Inyathelo 2021 annual report.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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