



# South Africa's Response to COVID-19 Pandemic through a Multimodal Approach

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## **Introduction**

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has taken an unprecedented economic toll on many countries' social and economic sectors; as such, this paper looks at the multimodal approaches adopted by the South African government in an effort to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. The outbreak of Covid-19 has been seen to possess far more danger than previous viral outbreaks, as it can spread rapidly, even by asymptomatic carriers. South Africa's economy, while maintaining inflation stability of between 4.13 and 6.3 percent since 2010, has been unable to effectively address historical socioeconomic inequality, unemployment and poverty. There should be significant systemic changes in the economy to unlock demand and prepare for sustainability. The government believes that the country must massively mobilize all of its energy on economic activities that will set the country on a sustainable recovery path.

The South African economy's problems have been exacerbated over time by persistently low levels of investment and expansion. The economy has also been hit by a number of declines, including a reduction of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Nevertheless, the South African government has managed well the Covid-19 pandemic situation, considering the devastating conditions the world is experiencing. Governments around the world, including South Africa, have adopted a wide variety of measures in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic (Oqubay, 2020). The response by South Africa to the Covid-19 outbreak has been important in the region; Devermont and Mukulu (2020) believe President Cyril Ramaposa has been a successful communicator, speaking openly to the citizens about the challenges ahead.

The government worked to close borders and limit travel plans, public functions and other social gathering and movement within the country (Devermont and Mukulu, 2020). The changing warning levels and policies instituted by the government in response to the pandemic's ever-changing nature helped to facilitate and led to greater compliance by members of the public. Many countries try to respond and reorient themselves in the face of an uncertain future.

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This article looks at the multimodal approaches adopted by the South African government in mitigating the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### ***Research methodology***

The research conducted utilized a qualitative approach, due to the inaccessibility of information gathering from an individual; as a result of Covid-19, this study collected data primarily through an extension of review of current literature, and — to add credence to the secondary sources — the data collected were analysed based on content. Adopting content analysis, the criteria for selecting documents reflect the issues on which the researcher is seeking evidence.

## ***Literature consideration***

As just one example of the negative impacts and unprecedented economic toll the pandemic has taken on many countries' social and economic sectors, one may need to look no further than the increasing unemployment rates not seen since the Great Depression. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, South Africa and other African governments remain constrained by poor healthcare systems, scarce resources, economic and spatial limitations on effective social-distance steps (Oqubay, 2020). However, many African governments signalled their readiness to respond to the pandemic effect by implementing lockdown rules. Under South Africa's national lockdown implementation policy, the country's most disadvantaged social groups struggle to feed their families (Reddy et al, 2020) and are unable to wash their hands regularly because they do not have access to clean water. Many cannot separate themselves if they live in crowded slums. As such, many households and employees across many countries are trying to reorient themselves in the face of an uncertain future.

Governments around the world have implemented a large number and a wide variety of policies in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, including South Africa. The Covid-19 pandemic found a weak South African economy (Ikwegbue, Enaifoghe, Maduku, and Agwuna, 2021). In reality, by the time the pandemic hit African shores, the South African economy had been in a slump for two quarters (Ikwegbue et al, 2021). As a consequence, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the economic downturn. (Ikwegbue et al, 2021.) further highlighted that many people have lost their homes, many have gone without money for long periods, and many go hungry daily. Given the magnitude of the many challenges, the necessary economic solutions could very well witness significant consequences as well. The already long cycle of economic depression, exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis, has also resulted in low levels of capacity utilisation in the different sectors of the South African economy. This pattern is expected to persist, painting a bleak picture for total fixed capital growth.

The substantial decline in the variable of gross fixed capital investment is a disconcerting trend, considering that this variable is crucial in maintaining and increasing the economy's productive base. Several governments, including South Africa, are gearing up to respond to the socio-economic shock caused by Covid-19

(Bodewig et al, 2020). The International Monetary Fund (2020) has instituted a policy tracker that summarizes the key economic responses that nearly 200 governments are taking to limit the human and economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the early actions in countries hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic range from “large economic stimulus packages and the lowering of interest rates to social safety nets for millions of their citizens.” (Bodewig et al, 2020).

The next section details the impact of Covid-19 restrictions in South Africa and the effect of the nationwide lockdown on the country’s economy. This includes an examination of the impact of Covid-19 on the South African economy and the government’s subsequent policy strategy, including adopted multimodal approaches. This next section also looks at the various strategies adopted by the South African government to enhance economic recovery, post-Covid-19.



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### ***The impact of Covid-19 on South Africa’s economy today and tomorrow***

The impact of Covid-19 restrictions in South Africa and the full effect of the nationwide lockdown on the economy is yet to be fully understood. Policymakers and researchers have lacked access to the quality, up-to-date data necessary to conduct rigorous analyzes of how and to what extent these rapidly changing policies have worked to mitigate the health, political and economic consequences of the pandemic (Ikwegbu et al, 2021). However, Statistics South Africa predicted that the country’s economy could be expected to contract by as much as 51 percent in the second quarter of 2020 (Köhler and Bhorat, 2020). In expectation of the socio-economic ramifications, the Department of National Treasury (2020), highlighted that the government of South Africa proposed an R500 billion stimulus package that included numerous support packages for small- and medium-sized enterprises, the informal sector (that part of any economy that is neither taxed

nor monitored by any form of government) and municipalities. As indicated in the South Africa 2020 supplementary budget review, the government must adopt approaches that support economic recovery during Covid-19 and beyond (Department of National Treasury 2020).

Leveraging its experience with the still-raging HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis — TB is South Africa's leading cause of death — the South Africa government deployed mobile research units, designed to drive the manufacture of 10,000 ventilators, during the Covid-19 lockdown (Devermont and Mukulu, 2020). Scholars like Smart, Broadbent and Combrink (2020), argued that the lockdown did not work in South Africa, and they raised the concern that it should not be mandated in the future. However, in its early stages between March and May 2020 (when lockdown levels 5 and 4 were implemented), the lockdown slowed the rate of infections — to about 3 percent a day — but not without its costs (Devermont and Mukulu, 2020). Although crime decreased in general between March and May 2020 during the most severe level-5 lockdown, there were, however looting cases and gender-based abuses among partners, in particular liquor store break-ins, and more than 17,000 people were arrested (Devermont and Mukulu, 2020). Far more troubling are reports of violence by security forces. At least eight police officers are being investigated for locking-related deaths in the course of the pandemic lockdown in South Africa.

As a result of the social distancing measures that curtail economic activity, supply chain disruptions affect prices, and remittances from abroad dry up (OECD, 2020). The government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic has benefited from lessons learned from the long history of past pandemics and epidemics (Hartzenberg, 2020). Indeed, ancient accounts detail how Mesopotamians from thousands of years ago reacted to the constant threat of epidemics by relying on spiritual traditions and by isolating people from others at the first signs of disease (Porter, 2005; Scott, 2017). Moving forward from the Mesopotamians, pandemics and epidemics have repeatedly and dramatically influenced the course of human history (Behbehani, 1983; Duncan-Jones, 1996; Crosby, 2003; Ziegler, 2013; Jannetta, 2014.), and governments have continued to follow a range of strategies in response.

The collection of accurate data has helped advance a common understanding of which policies are successful in alleviating the impact of an outbreak of disease (Snow, 1854; Paneth, 2004). Previous studies on pandemics and epidemics indicate that an effective strategy in one context may be ineffective in another because of a wide variety of potentially conditioning factors, including disease pathogenesis (Taubenberger and Morens, 2006; Kilbourne, 2006), the characteristics of the underlying population (Farmer, 1996; van Bavel et al, 2007; Bootsma and Ferguson, 2007, Hunter, 2007), and the available medical (Bandayrel et al, 2011; Albelin et al, 2011) and communications tools available (Chew and Eysenbach, 2010; Jarynowski et al, 2020) at the time. The study maintains that the data provided in this paper will also help policymakers and researchers determine how effective various strategies are in addressing the spread and health outcomes of Covid-19 (Flaxman et al, 2020).

The available research is necessarily preliminary, it indicates the types of policies adopted by the South African government in response to Covid-19, when state officials chose to enforce them, what those policies were designed to address, and how their construction was capable of positive impacts (Anwar et al, 2020; Corburn et al, 2020). The policies are significantly influenced by how the virus impacted the healing process outcomes across various sectors in country contexts (Anderson et al, 2020; Dorn et al, 2020; Barceló and Sheen, 2020). The dataset captured all of the above. (Büthe et al, 2020; Kubinec, 2020). Equally relevant is understanding why countries pursue various policies such as lockdown, with early

analyses indicating that structural and political influences — the authoritarian or democratic nature of a country's institutions (Cronert, 2020) or its level of political partisanship (Allcott et al, 2020) — play an important role.

The results would not only help South Africa to strengthen its pandemic responses, based on its current actions, but can also create an influential knowledge base capable of responding



to potential outbreaks globally (Barrett et al, 1998; Miller et al, 2009). Meanwhile, given the unexpected initial outbreak in Wuhan, China, the South African government policies introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic constitute the single-largest natural experiment in recent memory, enabling researchers to enhance causal inference in any number of fields. Indeed, the government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic could advance the world community's understanding of a wide range of social factors — from the evolution of political institutions (Pierson, 2000; Przeworski et al, 1999; Gailmard and Patty, 2019) to the advancement of economic development (Meltzer et al, 1999; Correia et al, 2020) and the stability of financial markets.

### ***Covid-19 and South African government response to enhance economic recovery.***

**With the economic impact of Covid-19 and the South African government's efforts to boost financial recovery, it is ironic that from an economic point of view, the costs of the Covid-19 response are likely to outweigh the economic costs of the pandemic itself.**

With the economic impact of Covid-19 and the South African government's efforts to boost financial recovery, it is ironic that from an economic point of view, the costs of the Covid-19 response are likely to outweigh the economic costs of the pandemic itself, (Githahu, 2020: 1). The quantum of these economic costs determined the pathway of infections, the efficacy of the government response plan, the length and coverage of the lockdown, and the phased exit strategy employed (Ajam, 2020). Some of these costs would be felt immediately, while others would manifest themselves more in the long term and beyond. It has been argued that if the pandemic is left uncontrolled, it will affect working adults, reduce their productivity for a month or two, which is likely to keep many away from work while killing a small number of people, especially the elderly who are out of work (Qiu et al, 2020). This rationale has led to more laissez-faire policies focused on "herd immunity" after 60–70 percent of the population had already been infected. The Covid-19 pandemic needs leaders to stabilise their organisations in the middle of a crisis and plan for a new, more volatile future.

South Africa's fiscal vulnerability adds to the body blows the economy has taken as a result of the pandemic-imposed trade shutdown. Due to a lack of "fiscal space," the state is reluctant to devote enough funds to help the industry while preserving consumer purchasing strength. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) staff study that preceded the government's Rapid Financing Instrument order, South Africa's economic operation is expected to contract by 7.2 percent in 2020. As stated by the IMF (2020), Covid-19 brought several difficulties, including an 18 percent decrease in jobs between February and April; any third-income earner in February did not earn income in April, and work losses were felt more strongly among women and manual labour. Those at the bottom of the income scale also suffered greatly. According to the IMF's assessment, currently, the most affected industries are manufacturing, personal services, commerce, catering, lodging, transportation, storage and communications (IMF, 2020). Manufacturing and mining were both halted as a result of the crisis.

South Africa and much of the world enforced limits on social mobility and contact in an attempt to halt the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, with a five-week national lockout from March 27 to May 1, supplemented by a risk-adjusted, staggered re-opening of the economy (Bhorat and Köhler, 2020a). A lockout scheme, on the other hand, was always likely to result in significant health deficits for people and families. These pandemic-related changes in wages, working hours and incomes for low-wage and vulnerable workers increased South Africa's already high levels of poverty and inequality. With these health losses in mind, President Ramaphosa unveiled the government's economic reconstruction and recovery plan (ERRP) to rebuild the South African economy after the pandemic's destruction (Bhorat and Köhler, 2020a).

The Ramaphosa Covid-19 stimulus plan, first unveiled on April 21, 2020, is massive, totalling about \$26 billion, or 10 percent of the economy's gross domestic product (GDP). South Africa's package is the largest in developing markets in terms of GDP; it is far greater than that of other high-income nations, including South Korea and Canada. About 90 percent of the stimulus plan was devoted to increased welfare support, aid to communities for the distribution of basic programmes, job security via the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), additional income relief through the tax system, financial help for small and medium enterprises, and the loan

guarantee programme, which was the largest portion. Notably, about 10 percent of the stimulus package, or \$3.2 billion, was allocated to social assistance, with an increase in cash transfers or social grants at both the intensive (the amount of any existing social grant was increased) (Köhler and Bhorat, 2020a) and extensive (the introduction of a new, special Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress grant) margins for six months, from May to October 2020 (Bhorat and Köhler, 2020a).

Individuals above the age of 18 who are disabled and do not receive any other social grant or assistance from the UIF are eligible for the Covid-19 grant. The president's proposal in October includes a further expansion of the Covid-19 grant's availability; its significant penetration (4.2 million previously unreached individuals) in just four months (equivalent to the grants system's increase over the last ten years) and resulting poverty-reducing results were key factors in the decision to increase access (Bhorat and Köhler, 2020b). Indeed, recent analysis has shown that the Covid-19 grant allocation has been reasonably pro-poor. Finally, the South African government's stimulus package was high by global standards, and its scope in terms of assistance to the weak and vulnerable was extensive. The investment fund programme, which accounts for two-fifths of the stimulus bill, allows private banks to make loans to struggling businesses. While it is an important component of the stimulus package that connects government assistance to the private sector through banks, its disbursement has been sluggish and subject to the tight credit conditions of South Africa's financial institutions. Furthermore, such assistance has come at the cost of a massive increase in the fiscal deficit (Bhorat and Köhler, 2020). Any further stimulus packages would almost certainly be fiscally unsustainable. The task now shifts to seeking instruments on both the tax collection and spending sides to put the nation on a calculated and optimal fiscal consolidation course.

### ***Multimodal approaches to social and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic***

In the government effort to control the continued spread of Covid-19 and mitigate the social and economic effects of the pandemic, different policy approaches have been adopted, including lockdown. Primarily, the informal-sector workforces and the self-employed in cities, like market vendors, are hit hard by the effect of the

Covid-19 lockdown measure (Cronert, 2020). This section looks at the multimodal approaches adopted by South African governments in responding to the social and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy. It further presents the multimodal approaches to Covid-19 by the South African government, such as the economic measures and the subsequent adjustments to the division of revenue and departmental allocations. It also looks at the government's pledge to strengthen the public finances and to position the economy for quicker and inclusive growth. The big question is what is South Africa's bold response to the Covid-19 pandemic to mitigate the effect of lockdown beyond the pandemic? The economic cost of Covid-19 in South Africa from a socio-political and economic perspective remains unprecedented and is different from other global financial shocks.

### ***i. Forging innovative economy through active strategy***

South African government prioritises public spending as proposed in the 2020 budget in reaction to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The South African government is "determined not only to restore our economy to pre-coronavirus levels, but to forge a modern economy in a new global reality" (The Presidency, 2020). To stabilise debt, improve the productivity and structure of public spending, and to unleash economic prosperity through reforms, bold, forthright and committed thought and actions are needed. The South Africa cabinet has approved a budget process for 2021 that will lead to debt stabilisation. The 2020 Medium Term Budget Policy Statements (MTBPS) will outline efforts to reduce the deficit so that debt is 87.4 percent of GDP by 2023/24. To agree on and introduce far-reaching economic reforms, an extended relationship among government, industry, labour and civil society is needed. The national treasury has planned two situations to highlight the policy consequences South Africa faces. Debt tends to climb in the passive situation, and debt-service payments exceed spending on social and economic needs. In the active situation, the government responds quickly to debt stabilisation by cutting expenditures and enacting structural reforms.

### ***ii. Restricting economic activity***

The government has prioritised saving lives and has taken the tough step of heavily restricting commercial investment at a time when GDP growth is still

low. The magnitude of the situation, as well as the ongoing volatility of epidemiological and economic consequences, has necessitated fast decisions in response to rapidly changing circumstances. South Africa, like other middle- and low-income countries with limited savings, must strike a balance between vital public health

and economic development. The government has implemented policies, such as extended lockdowns, with serious economic consequences, such as employment cuts, reduced tax revenue and increased poverty.

**The pandemic's evolution and consequences remain largely unpredictable.**

### ***iii. Relief package to manage impact of the virus***

In March 2020, the South African government launched a comprehensive recovery effort to deal with the virus's immediate effects. This entailed increasing capability in the public health sector as well as mitigating the impact of limited economic development on families and enterprises. Concurrently, the South African Reserve Bank has cut interest rates and bolstered the bond market, while signalling that it is prepared to take further steps if required. These Covid-19 changes expedite regular budget procedures to deliver funding to frontline services, regional and municipal governments, as well as businesses and households. However, the pandemic's evolution and consequences remain largely unpredictable.

### ***iv. Avoidance of the impending public-finance crisis***

As the government deals with the modern health and economic crises, a fiscal reckoning is on the horizon. The government's finances are dangerously strained. A debt crisis will ensue if immediate action is not taken during the budget process in 2021. Failure to control the country's ballooning debt and debt-service expenses, as well as failure to reduce the budget deficit, would damage the country's long-term economic prospects. Compensation and debt-service payments will be the highest spending elements in the medium term, outstripping government expenditures in human resources, social and economic infrastructure, and service delivery. As the municipal debt grows, a growing portion of tax income is passed to bondholders.

## ***Strategic response to preserve the economy***

In the quest to preserve the economy, the government of South African has managed the pandemic by responding in a phased manner. This includes preserving the economy through a set of immediate, targeted and temporary responses; a government effort to rebound from the crisis's immediate impact by encouraging investment and employment; and a pivot to prepare the economy for the rapid growth needed to regain the country's long-term stability.

The fiscal plan for Covid-19 includes R500 billion in economic relief (Bhorat et al, 2020), which includes R190 billion in key budget funding — R145 billion of which is instantly committed — to protect lives and support livelihoods, R70 billion in tax reform initiatives, and an R200 billion loan guarantee programme to support short-term economic development. Furthermore, the Reserve Bank has cut interest rates and given additional funding to the bond market, financial-sector rules have been relaxed to facilitate the flow of credit to households and enterprises, and commercial banks have implemented temporary payment holidays.

Major improvements in the public health sector are being made to ensure it can handle the virus' continued presence. Through the reprioritisation and new contributions of a total of R21.5 billion that is made available to healthcare, more than 1 million Covid-19 tests have been performed since the pandemic began, and the number of public-sector experiments has more than doubled in the last month, averaging about 14,000 tests each day (Köhler and Bhorat, 2020a). To date, more than 18 million South Africans have secured temporary Covid-19 grants, which would cost approximately R41 billion when combined with other interventions for disadvantaged households. The Covid-19 loan guarantee programme issued in excess of R10 billion in loans to small companies in its first few weeks of service.



*Image credit: Ashkan Forouzani / Unsplash*

The Unemployment Insurance Fund has given R23 billion in Covid-19 relief to more than 4.7 million jobs as of mid-June 2020 (Devermont and Mukulu, 2020). To the full degree possible, the wider public sector's balance sheets and operational capability have been changed to become part of the national response. State-owned enterprises, social welfare funds and public bodies such as the National Health Laboratory Service and the South African Social Security Agency are among those included in the response efforts. (Ikwegbue et al, 2021). In addressing the national emergency, the government has increased its collaboration with the private sector. The private health industry has made significant contributions, such as supplying urgent care beds at a low cost and supplementing measures to increase research. A private-sector programme, the Solidarity Fund, has supplemented the government's attempts to purchase medical and personal security equipment.

### ***Strategies in South Africa to enhance economic recovery post-Covid-19***

South Africa's adopted strategies to bolster economic recovery and its infection-prevention costs have resulted in loss of revenue. This is the case now and will be in the near future as a result of control steps. Lührmann, Edgell and Maerz (2020) articulated that the GDP encompasses the sum of the final products of all its enterprises, families, individuals and the public sector. As the virus infects individuals and households, it affects the household sector, the corporate sector, labour markets, the public sector, the balance of payments, foreign investment, prices and money supply (Correia et al, 2020). All of these impacts could combine to cause a downturn in economic growth (a contraction in GDP) that is currently difficult to predict, with estimates ranging from 6 to 16 percent (Fernandes, 2020).

As individuals, businesses and governments decrease their productivity, they also reduce exports (mainly in industries such as mining and agriculture) and their purchases. The consequence of Covid-19 on the overall economy is contentious: Both imports and exports are expected to decline, but the further decline is still unclear. Social distancing and consciousness amid lockdown are only appropriate in the middle-class suburbs; it is simply not realistic in overpopulated rural villages and townships where access to safe drinking water and sanitation has been despicably lacking for decades. More so, from the other side, the longer the

lockdown remains implemented, the more it tends to raise the economic costs of the lockdown (Bodewig et al, 2020). Extending the lockdown to a certain stage risks not being able to stem the pandemic and being able to pay the full economic consequences of the lockdown. The South African government developed a system of lock-down levels ranging from Level 5 (most restrictions on social and economic activities) to Level 1 (normal, unregulated operations), with some services classified as necessary or covered.

The South African government unveiled a risk-based exit lock-down plan by May 28, 2020, with sectors such as mining soon to be operational (James et al, 2020). Also, sector-specific health guidelines would need to be negotiated — and more significantly, implemented — to ensure employees' lives are not placed at a preventable risk (e.g., availability of personal protective equipment and adequate training) (Department of Cooperative Government, 2020).

## **Conclusions**

**The public debate is on the immediate response to the pandemic's economic impact.**

The public debate is on the immediate response to the pandemic's economic impact. That debate focuses on borrowing policies, the deployment of cash reserves, reprioritization of expenses, credit guarantee schemes and the balance sheet of the South African Reserve Bank. Such government policies as in the above areas can only be short term. In the medium term, the tax system may be the only viable basis for post-Covid-19 reconstruction financing. Inclusive development is the only way South Africa can dig out of this economic pit as a recovery measure. Such recovery measures cannot simply concentrate on rising growth rates, but must also change the course and nature of growth to a more employment-intensive, inclusive, climate-friendly and digitally smart path. The road forward calls for a radical reconceptualization of responsibilities and relationships between civil society and the public sector to forge a new social compact development. Stringent regulations are required to enable civil society to co-create a future post-Covid.

## **About the author**

Andrew Enaifoghe holds a master's degree and a doctorate in public administration from the University of Zululand. Prior to earning these advanced diplomas, he earned a bachelor's degree in history and international studies, with honours, at the Ambrose Alli University in Ekpoma, Nigeria, in 2007. He is a dynamic young researcher, and his areas of interest are multidisciplinary, covering social sciences and humanities. He specializes in subjects centering on citizen innovative participatory democracy, and he lists research contributions in socio-political, socio-economic, decolonization, history and education relating to Africa governance and development. Enaifoghe has multiple peer-reviewed article publications, book chapters and several conference proceedings. He is a guest editor to an international journal.

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