

## Internal Migration and the COVID-19 Policy Response in South Africa

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*Based on the findings of a KNOMAD survey and quantitative report, this Policy Brief focuses on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on South Africa's internal migrants who have migrated to two big cities - Cape Town and Johannesburg - from the rural areas and smaller towns of the less prosperous Eastern Cape in search of better livelihoods for themselves and their families in the Eastern Cape. While the high- and middle-income residents in the big cities could shield themselves well from the virus, millions of migrants who resided in over-crowded low-income informal settlements and townships underwent severe hardship with loss of jobs and incomes for many months, soaring costs of living and food insecurity, and little escape from getting infected. Despite a South African policy response to COVID-19, almost 60% of the migrants said that they received no food or financial help from government during the pandemic. The Brief offers comprehensive migration-sensitive recommendations to better address the livelihood interests of internal migrants especially in the context of migrant food security and future pandemic social assistance. These recommendations could be useful inputs for the government's ongoing pandemic preparedness plan.*

### **Introduction**

South Africa is one of the most heavily urbanized countries in Africa with over 70% of the population living permanently or temporarily in towns and cities.<sup>1</sup> It is also the most unequal society in the world with a Gini Coefficient of 63.0 in 2014.<sup>2</sup> Both of these factors shaped the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country and many of its social and economic impacts. The residents of high- and middle-income neighborhoods in the country's cities were able to shield themselves from the virus by hunkering down in single-family houses or mansions, rapidly shift to working and educating from home, dismiss their domestic workers who commuted from COVID-19 hotspots, easily access PPE and private healthcare, drive their cars to shop for food at supermarkets, and draw on their savings to tide them over.

The pandemic reality was very different for the millions of residents of over-crowded low-income informal settlements and townships with high rates of unemployment, over-crowded living conditions, reliance on public transportation, and without easy access to supermarkets for food purchase. The imposition and enforcement of blanket lockdowns and mobility restrictions on the entire country with military precision, and their implications and impacts were inevitably different for the two populations. COVID-19 was therefore a particularly urban disease, primarily because many urbanites lived in low-income communities and neighborhoods where it was all but impossible to avoid contact with the virus.

The large and growing literature on the South African pandemic has increasingly demonstrated that pandemic precarity and impact on the country's urban poor was segmented along lines of age, gender, type of employment, job sector, income, race, and class.<sup>3</sup> There is also evidence that the pandemic

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/455931/urbanization-in-south-africa/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gini-coefficient-by-country>

<sup>3</sup> <https://cramsurvey.org/reports/>

experience for international migrants in South Africa was worse than it was for many local residents, partially because they were employed in sectors that saw the highest rates of layoffs and were denied access to the same government relief measures as citizens.<sup>4</sup> What has been largely overlooked to date, however, is the reality that the country's major cities and low-income neighbourhoods host much larger numbers of internal migrants from some of the country's poorest provinces. Our research therefore focuses attention on the neglected question of how internal migrants in cities were impacted by the pandemic and with what immediate and longer-term consequences for migrant livelihoods. In this Policy Brief, we summarize the South African policy response to COVID-19, the major findings of the study based on a KNOMAD<sup>5</sup> survey of internal migrants, and the implications for formulating migration-sensitive policies going forward.

## **A Country at War**

The South African policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic was framed by the Presidency and Cabinet in military language as a war against an unseen enemy.<sup>6</sup> In its subsequent review of the policy challenges that confronted government, the Presidency noted that 'South Africa 'arguably implemented some of the strictest Covid-19 restrictions worldwide in the earlier stages of the pandemic in an effort to contain the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.'<sup>7</sup> Following declaration of a National State of Disaster in March 2020, a National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC) was quickly constituted to direct the national government response, and the South African Police Services (SAPS) and South African National Defence Force (SANDF) were dispatched to major cities to enforce the lockdown.<sup>8</sup> In the months that followed, over 400,000 people were arrested for breach of lockdown regulations.

In lifting the National State of Disaster in April 2022, 750 days later, President Ramaphosa declared that the government's response was both vital to control the spread of COVID-19 and a success in mitigating the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. While it is debatable how effective the measures were in controlling and mitigating COVID-19, they did not prevent millions from becoming infected and hundreds of thousands of deaths. The official death count now stands at over 100,000, although excess

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<sup>4</sup> Khan, F. and Kolabhai, M. (2021). Bureaucratic barriers to social protection for refugees and asylum seekers during the COVID-19 disaster in South Africa. *African Human Mobility Review*, 7(2): 74-94; Odunitan-Wayas, F. et al. (2021). Food insecurity and social injustice: The plight of urban poor African immigrants in South Africa during the COVID-19 crisis. *Global Public Health*, 16(1): 149-152; Ramachandran, S. et al. (2022). *Pandemic Food Precarity, Crisis-Living and Translocality: Zimbabwean Migrant Households in South Africa during COVID-19*. SAMP Migration Policy Series No. 85, Cape Town.

<sup>5</sup> The Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) is a global hub of knowledge and policy expertise on migration and development. KNOMAD is supported by a multi-donor trust fund established by the World Bank. The European Commission, and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH commissioned by and on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) are the contributors to the trust fund. KNOMAD undertook a survey-based multi-country study on the Impact of COVID-19 on Internal Migration, Labor Markets and Urbanization. South Africa was one of the countries surveyed.

<sup>6</sup> Seekings, J. and Nattrass, N. (2020). COVID vs. democracy: South Africa's lockdown misfire. *Journal of Democracy*, 31(4): 106-121.

<sup>7</sup> Presidency of South Africa (2021). *South Africa Covid-19 Country Report* [First edition] (Pretoria: Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Government Technical Advisory Centre & National Research Foundation).

<sup>8</sup> Faull A. et al. (2021). Lockdown lessons: Violence and policing in a pandemic. Southern Africa Report No. 44, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria.

mortality data suggests the true number may be closer to 300,000.<sup>9</sup> Seroprevalence studies in major urban centres suggest that almost half of all urban residents may have been infected.<sup>10</sup>

In response to the economic hardships of the initial pandemic lockdown, government introduced a package of temporary social protection relief measures:

- *Food parcel distribution program* targeted 250,000 households but was abandoned following allegations of mismanagement and corruption at the local level.<sup>11</sup>
- *COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant* intended for unemployed individuals in poor households. As many as 10 million individuals were eligible for the ZAR350 (USD19) per person per month grant. By October 2020, the number approved reached 6.1 million (Table 1). Around 60% of rejected applicants were eligible for grants prompting one study to conclude that the SRD was poorly targeted and “beleaguered by both errors of inclusion and errors of exclusion.”<sup>12</sup>
- *Temporary top ups to existing social grants.* Prior to the pandemic, the government provided 18 million social grants every month, of which the child support grant (CSG) was the most important. A total of ZAR400 per month was paid to caregivers for each child in a family. The CSG was topped up by an additional ZAR350 per child for the month of May, and by ZAR500 per caregiver (regardless of the number of children) from June to October 2020. Other grant benefits were topped up by an additional ZAR250 per month for six months. There were 7.2 million beneficiaries of the top-up CSG.

	No. of Beneficiaries (Oct 2020)	Total Expenditure (ZAR million)
Social Relief of Distress (SRD)	6,115,659	2,140
Child Support Grant (CSG)	7,227,030	3,614
Foster Care	375,528	93
Care Dependency	157,542	39
Older Persons	3,705,893	926
Disability	1,063,996	263

<sup>9</sup> Bradshaw, D. et al. (2022). COVID-19 and all-cause mortality in South Africa: The hidden deaths in the first four waves. *South African Journal of Science*, 118: 13300.

<sup>10</sup> Mutevedzi, P. et al. (2022). Estimated SARS-CoV-2 infection rate and fatality risk in Gauteng Province, South Africa. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 51: 404-417

<sup>11</sup> Mudau, P. (2022). The implications of food-parcel corruption for the right to food during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. *ESR Review*, 23(2): 4-9.

<sup>12</sup> Moses, M. and Wollard, I. (2023). The role of temporary social grants in mitigating the poverty impact of COVID-19 in South Africa. In P. Fourie and G. Lamb (Eds.), *The South African Response to COVID-19 The Early Years* (New York: Routledge), pp. 156-177

<sup>13</sup> van Seventer, D. et al. (2022). Recovering from COVID-19: Economic scenarios for South Africa. IFPRI Discussion Paper 02033, Washington D.C.

- *Temporary Employer-Employee Relief Scheme (TERS)*. The TERS was a wage subsidy scheme designed to support firms and workers in the formal sector.<sup>14</sup> The policy targeted workers who suffered income loss because of full or partial closure of their employer’s operations. Pandemic benefits ranged from 38% to 60% of a worker’s wage subject to lower and upper limits of ZAR 3,500 and ZAR 6,730 respectively. Government used existing structures, databases, and legislation to roll out the benefits. Because the policy and its mode of implementation were confined to registered formal sector employees, few individuals working informally benefitted.

The severe consequences of the rolling pandemic lockdowns for the national economy and the urban poor are well-documented.<sup>15</sup> However, there have been only a few analyses of the impact of the pandemic on internal migrants and their geographically split households in both rural and urban areas or their access to government pandemic relief programs in 2020.<sup>16</sup> The 700 page report on the pandemic issued by the Presidency in April 2021 concludes that “for many migrants, the effect of the lockdown was profound and touched all aspects of their lives.”<sup>17</sup> However, the report interprets the term “migrant” to mean international migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, and misleadingly labels all South Africans (including internal migrants) as “non-migrants.” A review of policy documents and strategies issued by government in the first two years of the pandemic similarly shows that the plight of internal migrants and their distant families did not feature at all.

The significance of this omission is illustrated by Table 2, which shows the net number of inter-provincial migrants by province. The two major migrant destination provinces are Gauteng (GP) and Western Province (WP) with a combined total of over 7 million internal migrants in 2022. Over the last decade, the number of in-migrants in the two provinces increased by 1,209,171. Most other provinces are net out-migration areas with the Eastern Cape and Limpopo particularly affected.

<b>Table 2: Inter-Provincial Migration in South Africa<sup>18</sup></b>			
	Lifetime Migration		
	In-Migration	Out-Migration	Net Migration
<b>Migrant Destinations</b>			
Gauteng	5,188,286	1,050,551	4,137,735
Western Cape	2,043,626	303,237	1,740,389
North West	647,621	521,232	126,439
<b>Migrant Origins</b>			
Eastern Cape	431,883	2,009,859	-1,577,976
Limpopo	459,831	1,661,953	-1,202,122

<sup>14</sup> Köhler, T. and Hill, R. (2022). Wage subsidies and COVID-19: The distribution and dynamics of South Africa’s TERS policy. *Development Southern Africa*, 39(2022): 689-721.

<sup>15</sup> Section 2 of Crush, J. et al. (2023). *COVID-19 Impact on Internal Migration, Labour Markets and Urbanization: South Africa Case Study*. SAMP Report for KNOMAD, Cape Town.

<sup>16</sup> Statistics South Africa, *Social impact of COVID-19 (Wave 3): Mobility, Migration, and Education*. Report-00-08-04 (Pretoria: SSA, 2020); Ginsburg, C. et al. (2022). The impact of COVID-19 on a cohort of origin residents and internal migrants from South Africa’s rural northeast. *SSM Population Health*, 17(2022): 101049.

<sup>17</sup> Presidency of South Africa (2021). *South Africa Covid-19 Country Report*.

<sup>18</sup> Statistics South Africa (2023), *Census 2022: Statistical Release* (Pretoria).

Kwazulu Natal	603,265	1,032,051	-428,796
Free State	278,406	608,624	-330,218
Northern Cape	152,158	232,649	-80,491
Mpumalanga	648,017	672,263	-24,246

## Key Survey Results

The SAMP Survey for KNOMAD focused on the two largest cities in the two highest in-migration provinces (Cape Town in Western Province; and Johannesburg in Gauteng) and migrants from the largest out-migration province (Eastern Cape). The survey sample comprised 1,733 migrant households who were randomly selected in 18 low-income townships and informal settlements. The main policy-relevant findings include the following:

- Migrants from the Eastern Cape leave for the two cities because of the lack of economic opportunity in that province and the prospect of working and earning income in the country's major centres of productive activity. Nearly 90% indicated that a major reason for migrating was to earn income to send back home. On every economic indicator, migrants rated Cape Town and Johannesburg as better than their home area in the Eastern Cape. The only indicator in which the Eastern Cape scored significantly better was personal safety and the risk of falling victim to crime and violence.
- Despite relocation to the two cities, migrants retain strong social and economic ties with family members 'left behind' in the Eastern Cape. Over 90% of migrants return to their home area at least once per year or more frequently. Almost 80% said they intended to eventually return to the Eastern Cape, likely in retirement. South Africa's internal migrants are therefore integrated into what are commonly known as spatially 'split' or 'translocal' households.<sup>19</sup> The pandemic impact in the cities was thus not confined to migrants in those cities, but also affected their family in the Eastern Cape.
- At the time of the survey, most migrants were remitting funds monthly, although the amounts remitted had declined since before the pandemic. Nearly 60% were remitting less than before, and nearly 30% much less than before. In essence, this means that the economic and livelihood impact of the pandemic shock reverberated well beyond Cape Town and Johannesburg into distant rural communities in the Eastern Cape.
- In countries such as India, the advent of COVID-19 precipitated mass movement of migrants from cities to the countryside.<sup>20</sup> There is no evidence of a similar phenomenon in South Africa. Only 14% of the respondents in Cape Town and Johannesburg returned to the Eastern Cape during the lockdown, most electing to remain in the cities either by choice or because of the effectiveness of the policing of inter-provincial mobility and movement controls. The small group that did return

<sup>19</sup> Steinbrink, M. and Niedenfuhr, H. (2020). *Africa on the Move. Migration, Translocal Livelihoods and Rural Development in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cham: Springer).

<sup>20</sup> Irudaya Rajan, S. et al. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and internal labour migration in India: A 'crisis of mobility'. *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 63: 1021-1039.

home went for non-economic reasons to be with family, to look after sick relatives, to attend funerals, or because they were afraid of catching COVID-19.

- The pandemic lockdown caused significant economic disruption and hardship for migrant households in both cities. Nearly 30% of the respondents lost their jobs and remained out of work for many months. One third indicated that their pre-pandemic income had declined, with 13% estimating that it had declined by more than 50%. Those who retained or regained their jobs were among the 90% who agreed that the pandemic had caused great economic hardship for the household and the 80% who said that household economic conditions were worse now than before the pandemic.
- One of the primary reasons for hardship appears to have been the soaring cost of living and the price of food. Food insecurity increased dramatically during the pandemic<sup>21</sup> and various coping strategies (as measured by the Coping Strategies Index) were clearly insufficient to stave off hunger and declining dietary diversity and nutritional adequacy. At the time of the survey, an average of 44% of total household income was spent on food and groceries, a clear marker of the food insecurity and poverty confronting internal migrants in the city.
- There was a clear difference in opinion amongst surveyed migrants about the effectiveness of the overall government response to COVID-19, with 31% saying that it was effective, 58% that it was ineffective, and 11% undecided (Table 3). Over 90% felt that the lockdown itself went on for too long and nearly 60% said that many people in their community had disobeyed the lockdown. Nearly 60% of migrants surveyed indicated that they were forced to disobey the lockdown simply to access food.

	Agree %	Disagree %	Neither %
The lockdown went on for much too long	92.9	4.8	2.3
Government policies towards COVID-19 were not effective	57.9	31.1	11.0
Many people in my neighbourhood/community did not obey the lockdown	55.9	34.3	9.8
My family and I were forced to disobey the lockdown to get food to eat	35.4	54.9	9.8
I or members of my family were arrested/fined for not staying at home during the lockdown	13.6	81.1	5.4

- There was a strong correlation between migrant opinions of government effectiveness and access to pandemic relief measures. Nearly 60% of those surveyed said they had received no food or financial help from government at all during the pandemic. Only 24% benefitted from the

<sup>21</sup> Hart, T. et al. (2022). The COVID-19 pandemic reveals an unprecedented rise in hunger: The South African government was ill-prepared to meet the challenge. *Scientific African*, 16: e01169.



government’s Social Relief of Distress Grant and 15% from the increase in the Child Support Grant. A mere 10% had benefitted from the government’s food parcel distribution program in the early days of the lockdown.

**Table 4: Access to Pandemic Relief Measures**

	%
No help	56.7
COVID-19 Grant from Government	23.9
Increase in Government Child Grant	14.8
Government food parcel	9.5
Cash from a savings club	5.5
Cash/food from a church	2.7
Cash/food from an NGO or charity	2.2
Cash/food from a political party	1.0
Cash from a stokvel	0.7

The negative perceptions of government policy and the limited access to relief measures raise important questions about how a more effective management and policy planning response could be put in place to deal with future shocks to the lives and livelihoods of internal migrant households.

### Migration-Sensitive Recommendations

In 2022, South African public health experts stressed the need for a far-reaching high-level, cross-cutting pandemic preparedness planning initiative.<sup>22</sup> In March 2023, the South African government noted that its pandemic preparedness plan was being updated based on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>23</sup> As an input to this policy process this concluding section of the Brief reflects on the lessons learned from the survey about how internal migrants experienced and responded to pandemic policy. It also makes recommendations for how their livelihood interests can be better addressed in pandemic preparedness planning, with special reference to future pandemic social assistance.<sup>24</sup>

- Questions continue to be raised about the rationale for a ‘wartime’ policy response to COVID-19 and the harshness of a wide-ranging national lockdown that was applied to everyone across the country, irrespective of their ability to weather the storm or obey the restrictions and regulations.<sup>25</sup> The effectiveness of stringent nationwide pandemic lockdowns and criminalizing violators in a society where the urban poor, and internal migrants in particular, are unable to observe stay-at-home orders or cope with the economic consequences without substantial

<sup>22</sup> Department of Health (2022). Mitigating COVID-19 in South Africa: Going Forward. Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19, Pretoria; Tucker, T. et al. (2022). South Africa needs to establish a Pandemic Preparedness Initiative now. *The Conversation*, 7 April; see also World Bank (2021). *South Africa Economic Update Edition 13: Building Back Better From COVID-19, With a Special Focus on Jobs* (Washington DC: World Bank).

<sup>23</sup> Ramkrishna, W. (2023). Republic of South Africa COVID-19 experience and multi-sectoral priorities for future pandemic preparedness. Briefing to WHO Member States, 30 March.

<sup>24</sup> Borat, H. et al. (2021). Social assistance amidst the COVID-19 epidemic in South Africa: A policy assessment. *South African Journal of Economics*, 89(1): 63-81.

<sup>25</sup> Carlitz, R. and Makhura, N. (2021). Life under lockdown: Illustrating tradeoffs in South Africa’s response to COVID-19. *World Development*, 137: 105168.

assistance needs to be revisited, critically evaluated, and alternative scenarios sought and modelled.<sup>26</sup>

- Given the catastrophic impact of the pandemic on migrant food security, the problems that led to the cancellation of the government's pandemic food relief program need to be understood and addressed in planning for future pandemic preparedness. One recent proposal concerns the idea of distributing 'food hampers' to mitigate food insecurity in times of crisis.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, food price controls, subsidies, and penalties for price gouging need to be incorporated into preparedness plans.
- The limited reach of social protection pandemic relief measures for migrants should be a source of considerable concern given their eligibility. More research is certainly needed on if and why internal migrants were unable to access their entitlements. Social protection experts have argued that COVID-19 exposed a major gap in coverage, given the disproportionate impact of lockdowns on the urban poor.<sup>28</sup> They propose a rights-based national social protection system with two components: categorical social assistance for non-working vulnerable groups and universal social insurance for all working adults (formal, informal, or self-employed) financed out of general revenues. While the argument for universality may need tempering, there also needs to be provision for the unemployed and distant family members. However, the findings of this survey lend support to the argument for universal social protection during and in the aftermath of a future pandemic shock.
- The survey found that COVID-19 had a clear negative impact on the volume and frequency of remitting to the Eastern Cape. In effect, this means that rural family members were directly impacted by the lockdown in the cities. Most migrants are still using banks and informal channels, such as personal conveyance, to send remittances to family. Digital remittance platforms and mobile wallets are not yet widely adopted, despite the likely savings in time and transaction costs. MPESA tried and failed to set up shop in South Africa because of limited demand before the pandemic. Incentives for greater utilization of digital remitting would need to come from the private sector which has had considerable success in tapping the international remittance market.<sup>29</sup> However, government can work to ensure that there is an enabling policy environment in place so that remittance flows would not be as seriously affected in future pandemics.
- There has been widespread criticism of the weakness to designate the informal economy as an essential service, its over-hasty shutdown during the lockdown, and the excessive bureaucratic red tape involved in its partial re-opening.<sup>30</sup> An overhaul of policy towards the informal sector,

<sup>26</sup> Garbaa, S. et al. (2020). Modeling the transmission dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. *Mathematical Biosciences*, 328: 108441.

<sup>27</sup> Coste, M. et al. (2022). 'Hampers' as an effective strategy to shift towards sustainable diets in South African low-income communities. *Development Southern Africa* (online).

<sup>28</sup> Devereux, S. and Cuesta, J. (2021). Urban-sensitive social protection: How universalized social protection can reduce urban vulnerabilities post COVID-19. *Progress in Development Studies*, 21(4): 340-360.

<sup>29</sup> Crush, J. and Tawodzera, G. (2023). Digital disruptions in the South Africa–Zimbabwe remittance corridor during COVID-19. *Migration and Development* (Online)

<sup>30</sup> Battersby, J. (2020). South Africa's lockdown regulations and the reinforcement of anti-informality bias. *Journal of Agriculture and Human Values*, 37: 543-544; Wegerif, M. (2020). "Informal" food traders and food security: Experiences from the COVID-19 response in South Africa. *Food Security*, 12: 797-800; Wegerif, M. (2023). Street traders' contribution to food security: Lessons from fresh produce traders' experiences in South Africa during Covid-19. *Food Security* (2023).



not just in times of crisis, is long overdue given its centrality to consumers in low-income areas of the cities. The survey showed that a significant group of migrants are also dependent on informal sector income for household survival. Comprehensive pandemic planning should not simply focus on job protection in the formal sector, but include a rights-based, migrant-sensitive plan for recognition and support of the informal sector during a future crisis.

- The survey asked respondents what kinds of help they would want from government in the event of another pandemic. Money for food and housing rated highest (at around 40% of respondents). This figure may seem relatively low in the context of a pandemic that caused significant hardship for migrant households, but it could well reflect a lack of confidence, born of the COVID-19 experience, in government's ability to deliver. Wage and health insurance commanded a degree of support, although only 36% were willing to enrol in a program that docked pay so that they were protected during another lockdown. An education campaign on the benefits of insurance amongst a largely uninsured population might expand the level of interest and choice for migrants. The idea of paying in advance for a future that may never arrive may be a hard sell for migrants spending over 40% of their income on food in the daily struggle for a livelihood.

In South Africa, it would be useful if these lessons learned from COVID-19 pandemic are implemented in a future migration-sensitive comprehensive pandemic preparedness plan. Beyond its national borders, South Africa can also benefit from an Africa-wide consultation on lessons learned for the future. In this respect, it is encouraging that government hosted meetings in Johannesburg in August 2023 concerning a potential African Union and BRICS framework of cooperation for Pandemic, Preparedness, Prevention, Response and Recovery (3P2R).<sup>31</sup> The key lesson from this project is that the rights and concerns of millions of internal and international South-South migrants needs to be integrated into the 3P2R Framework as well.

## Endnotes

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/brics-nations-urged-build-structures-prepare-future-pandemics>