

## The Economy and Unemployment Under Covid-19: A Review of The South African Government's Response

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### Abstract

The World Bank Group's 13th edition of the South Africa Economic Update (SAEU) and the Statistics South Africa concur that COVID-19 pandemic worsened the country's economic trajectory which was already experiencing low levels of employment. South Africa's level of employment and economic status were far below the standard of most middle-income countries even before the pandemic. The high unemployment rate has been attributed to a decade characterised by weak job creation strategies. The report from SAEU also finds that the job market was severely affected and that recovery has been slow despite the government's prompt response to the pandemic. This paper seeks to explore the effects of COVID-19 on the job market economy. The paper further seeks to review the south African government's efforts in mitigating the economic impacts of the pandemic and resulting unemployment hike. Using existing literature and relevant reports, the paper argues that South Africa's overall economic response to the pandemic was insufficient particularly in the labour market despite the many sizable social and economic relief measures. Furthermore, the paper provides recommendations on how the South African government can improve its efforts in dealing with both the immediate and long term impact of COVID-19 on the economy and unemployment. It is recommended that greater support for small businesses should be introduced as well as offering tax rebates to businesses creating labour intensive jobs.

**Key words:** *Economy, employment, COVID-19, labour market, job creation.*

### Introduction

The coronavirus disease of 2019 otherwise commonly known as COVID-19 originated in Wuhan City in China before it spread all over world and later declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). The pandemic has since poses a mammoth encounter to South Africa and many other countries of the world in as far as the management of the pandemic is concerned (Munzhedzi & Phago, 2020; WHO, 2020). The pandemic which is being managed differently from one country depending on the strength, capacity and principles of that country. The effect of the pandemic all over the globe has been massive in that almost all sectors of society are impacted. Even worse is that many countries including South Africa imposed lockdown at some point on international and local travel based on their lockdown regulations and guidelines (Dong, Hu & Gao 2020). Bhorat, Oosthuizen and Stanwix (2020) posit that softening the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on the working poor and low income earners who are unlikely to have safety nets and protection

against the economic shock is amongst the primary concerns of many researchers, policymakers and civil society organisations. This is mainly because there is a significant number of low income earners in various sectors including the service sector, hospitality, food and non-food trade, construction, domestic work, and manufacturing have been unable to earn an income during lockdown periods. Such workers are more vulnerable because they are unlikely to benefit from pre-existing state support and unemployment benefits. However, South Africa did introduce measures to assist those affected, albeit not sufficient. While evidence points to a significant decline in active employment in many parts of the world, very little is known about the overall impact of COVID-19 on the economy and labour market particularly in the developing countries where relevant detailed data is still scarce. This paper explores the effects of COVID-19 on the economy and labour market in south Africa. Furthermore, it examines the South African government's response to these challenges through the review of recent literature. The paper contributes to the emerging literature on the economic and social impact of COVID-19.

### **Conceptualization of the economy, unemployment and COVID-19**

Achieving price stability, reducing unemployment, and creating sustainable economic growth through prudent macroeconomic policies is a major goal for every economy regardless of whether it is developed or developing (Tanha, 2018). It is for this reason that post-apartheid South Africa has a relatively long history of robust discussions around economic growth and its impact on poverty, inequality and related social issues. Niyimbanira (2017: 254) notes that these discussions are underpinned by a general consensus that poverty and income inequality in particular are two persistent development issues linked to the legacy of apartheid governance and economic structure, a direct indication that economic growth may positively impact on the reduction of income inequality and resulting poverty. The system of apartheid gave economic and employment opportunities preference to those who were previously advantaged (whites) as opposed to those who were previously disadvantaged (largely black and women) (Munzhedzi, 2020). The effect of the that historical fact is still prevalent even in 2021 where the unemployment statistics is 34,4% in the second quarter of 2021 (Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2021). Statistics (2020) also indicated that the rate of unemployed Africans was 36,5 in quarter one of 2020 as compared to 8,8% of Whites, 11,8% of Asians/Indians and 25.7% of Coloured respectively. In the 2021 quarter two statistics, the unemployment of women was 36,8% in the 2nd quarter of 2021 as compared to 32,4% amongst men. The Stats SA (2021) further state that the rate of unemployment of black African women was 41,0% as compared to 8,2% among white women, 22,4% among Indian/Asian women and 29,9% among coloured women.

Unemployment is defined as the number of the work force who are without work but are seeking employment (Stats SA, 2021). Although some standard and national definitions may differ, most definitions of unemployment agree to the notion of job seeking and ability to find work as the main characteristics of unemployment

(Alkatheri & Al-Ghamdi AL-Malaise, 2019:23). Unemployment is regarded as one of the fundamental economic issues globally. Todaro (1994) consider unemployment as a major macroeconomic challenge particularly for many countries in the developing world including the South African economy. Considering that real Gross Domestic Product (GDP), inflation and unemployment are the three most essential determinants of economic development, Khalid, Akalpler, Khan, Shah and Khan (20021:2) argue that the South Africa's poor economic performance is a result of its slow expansion of volume production by industries as well as the inadequate creation of employment opportunities. Furthermore, Khalid et al (2021:2) note that while unemployment is a global problem, it has reached critical levels in South Africa and its reduction will require sustained economic growth in current periods.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020), the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), first discovered in China in November 2019 is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The disease has since spread rapidly to almost every country in the world. It was declared a global public health emergency by the WHO on 30 January 2020 and later a global pandemic on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2020. South Africa, like many other countries has been affected by the pandemic after recoding its first case on March 2020. The number of cases and related deaths has since risen leading the government to impose a number of measures to curb the spread of the virus. The measures include declaration of a national state of disaster beginning of March the 16<sup>th</sup> coupled with recurring partial travel ban, closing of business, education and social activities (Munzhedzi, 2021). The spread of the virus and the consequent economic lockdown and other measures have had an enormous impact on the economy and the labour market which this paper seeks to explore.

## **Theoretical framework**

The analysis of unemployment-output relationship in macroeconomics, viewed broadly as the connection between labour and the goods markets has mainly been examined through the Okun's law (Mazorodz & Siddi, 2018: 168). The theory posits that the cyclical output changes are inversely related to changes in the unemployment rate. This intuitive relation means that economic contraction leads to firing of workers by firms in order to cut production costs and employment of more workers when the economy recovers through demand management policies including expansionary fiscal and monetary policies, and thus reducing the rate of unemployment. Onakoya and Seyingbo (2020:55) suggests that Okun's Law does in effect refer to the inverse nexus between output and unemployment and argue that there must be a constant rise in the size of the labour force as well as an increase in labour productivity in order for the economy to grow at a pace above its potential and consequently reduce unemployment.

Like other theories, Okun's Law too is not without criticism. The theory is criticised for relying only on statistical data and not based on sound economic reasoning. The argument is that unemployment cannot only be attributed to changes in economic growth but also to other intermediary factors linking both variables (Ismihan, 2010;

Melguizo, 2017). The connection between economic growth and unemployment has therefore also been modelled in a non-linear manner. The Okun's relationship too has however mutated over time and across various nations in addition to being diverse during the course of the business cycle and thus making it imperative for policymakers to have clear understanding these variations (Ball, 2017 cited in Onakoya & Seyingbo, 2020: 55). This paper therefore leans on the Okun's law argument to show the relationship between COVID-19 pandemic, economic decline and unemployment in South Africa. Relying on available data on the country's performance during the pandemic, this paper argues that the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures severely affected the South African job market.

Available literature on the theory of employment also centres around two other major theoretical arguments namely the Classical and Keynesian theories. The Classical theory argues for a full employment of labour through flexibility of prices and wages in the case of any deviation. The argument is that the notion of over-production and general unemployment are impossible and therefore the economy generally does not require government intervention in the form of spending to attain full employment since there is the existence of full employment. On the contrary, the Keynesian theory argues that economic growth brought about by full employment is mainly a result of the country's total economic spending because the economy is regarded as inherently unstable, government intervention through spending, efficient resource allocation and market regulation is required to attain full employment (Selase, 2019:3-4). This paper takes the Keynesian approach to examine the South Africa's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper argues that the government's efforts which were mainly social and redistributive were not sufficient to resuscitate economic activity and growth in time to save jobs and create social impact.

### **The relationship between COVID-19, the South African economy and unemployment**

South Africa has had a fragile economy since the advent of democracy in 1994 and COVID-19 has arguably brought the deepest recession in recent times. South Africa's GDP shrunk by seven (7) percent more than other emerging economies in 2020 and is now characterised by an increasing fiscal deficit, fiscal revenues and a large relief package (World Bank Group, 2020:3). The GDP is further characterised by a high debt service cost which puts the economy in further danger and crowds out resources needed for public investment and much-needed needed developmental spending (World Bank Group, 2020:3). The global pandemic continues to affect the South African economy in various ways. Chitiga-Mabugu, Henseler, Mabugu and Maisonnave (2021) outline how COVID-19 affected the South African economy through both international and domestic channels. Internationally, the country has since the pandemic faced a decline in demand for its export because of the economic situation caused by lockdowns or severe slowdown in some of its biggest trading partners such as Germany, China and the United States of America. The country is also affected in several ways at a domestic level. The economic lockdowns and teleworking has resulted in decreased labour and capital which in turn affects

production levels of most economic sectors (Chitiga-Mabugu *et al*, 2021:87). South Africa's labour market has historically suffered from structurally high unemployment and labour inactivity and was further weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The country's unemployment ratio has been much lower than that of its peers in emerging economies already exceeding 25 percent by the year 2016. The share of people of working age not in employment, education, or training (NEET) was already high at 24 percent making two in every five people of working age NEET. Unemployment rate reached 29 percent at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and had increased to 32.6 percent by March 2021 with a record of 2.2 million jobs lost by mid-2020 (World Bank Group, 2021:13). The current employment crisis has great impact on other socio-economic issues because as an institution, the labour market primarily determines various socio-economic welfare measures. There is a correlation between finding a stable formal sector employment and existing poverty and similarly, between falling back into poverty after losing employment. The relationship between employment, inequality and poverty is therefore particularly important in a country that is regarded as one of the most unequal in the world (Ranchhod & Daniels, 2020). Understanding the employment losses caused by COVID-19 is not only important for understanding the country's economic performance during pandemic but understanding the significance of these employment shocks on the country's welfare and as triggers for household poverty. Espi, Leibbrandt and Ranchhod (2020:3) explicitly shows the link between lock-down related job losses, income losses and resulting poverty by indicating that over 3 million people fell into poverty from April 2020 at the beginning of the lockdown. A report on employment by Stats SA (2021:19) found that COVID-19 and related lock-down does not only affect the health but has heavy economic implications and the labour market which are likely to continue for many years to come. This is due to the imposed lock-down restrictions where only some sections of the labour force are able to work either physically or remotely while others are unable to and some only able to work for reduced hours and income. These conditions have also caused a number of businesses to close down leaving a number of people without employment.

### **Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the South African government declared a national state of disaster in terms of Section 27(2) of the Disaster Management Act, 2002 (Act 57 of 2002) and imposed a national lockdown in March 2020 to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus and prepare the country's health system to manage the pandemic. The government took further economic and social measures to provide additional resources to the health system and to minimise the negative impact of the pandemic on individuals and businesses (Burger & Calit, 2021:3). The South African government announced a R500 billion (almost 10 Percent of total GDP) financial support package in March 2020 to help fight the health crisis and its consequent socio-economic issues. An amount of 270 billion rand from that lumpsum was reserved for tax relief and credit guarantees for commercial bank loans for affected businesses. The remaining R230 billion was meant for several forms of relief for

affected individuals, households and small businesses (The Auditor-General of South Africa, 2021). Government also procured massive personal protective equipment (PPEs) from outside and inside the borders of the country. South Africa and many other developing countries were found wanting in that they lacked capacity to produce sufficient supply of some of the needed PPEs (Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020). The South African national government like other developing countries of Africa also responded by procuring vaccines from several countries of the world including but not limited to India, United States of America and China. These vaccines were to cater for all citizens in the country, namely, rich and poor as well as the middle class. By the year 2021, none of the African countries including South Africa had not produced any vaccines as a measure of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Governance and mismanagement of resources**

Whilst the effectiveness of the measures introduced by the South African government as a response to the devastating effect of the pandemic are debatable, there is already a believe that the money was injected into an already compromised environment due to internal control weaknesses including poor financial management, record keeping, inadequate planning and execution with little or no oversight, leadership instability and lack of coordination between various government departments (Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020; Auditor-General, 2021:10-11). Furthermore, the report of the Auditor-General (2021:10-11) found other issues such as slow progress in getting initiatives off the ground and delayed expenditure for procurement and expanded public works, unfair processes, signs of overpricing, and potential fraud related government procurement. Munzhedzi (2021) referred to the non-transparency of the public procurement during the COVID-19 pandemic environment which he argues as having a negative contribution towards fraudulent and corrupt practises in public institutions. The claim of corrupt activities during the lockdown was in the main by opposition political parties including but not limited to Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and reported by various media houses and centred around the procurement of protective equipment for health facilities and the construction of shelters for the homeless (EFF, 2020). The legislative prescripts allow for public procurement under emergencies like COVID-19 pandemic without following certain due processes like advertisement in open media. However, there were manipulation of processes and procedures for selfish interest (EFF, 2020; Munzhedzi & Phago, 2020). Furthermore, Munzhedzi (2021:5) argues that transparency in public institution is critical as it is through such processes where anomalies are detected and adequately dealt with. Government officials and decisions makers are therefore likely to act better, honestly and take accountability where transparency is a norm.

### **Public expenditure on COVID-19 pandemic**

The country's financial commitment to fighting the effects of the pandemic and associated socio-economic issues comes at a massive cost with unintended consequences for the country. This is not disputing the government's responsiveness

through provision of financial resources for additional hospital beds, medical facilities and quarantine sites, medical equipment, medicines, community screening, and awareness programmes. Furthermore, the money was used to purchase PPEs for health and educational facilities, emergency measures such as the disaster relief funds, tax relief, small business funding and the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) and unemployment grants. Bhorat and Köhler (2020:4) argues that while the South African government's stimulus package was large by global standards and its impressive in terms of support for the poor and vulnerable, it comes at an enormous expense to the country's fiscal deficit and likely unsustainable.

Part of the government's intent with the public expenditure through the relief fund for business was to save and perhaps create more employment during and after the pandemic. This view is supported by those who argue that a higher government expenditure will grow GDP sufficiently to stabilise the debt/GDP ratio in the aftermath of the crisis. This approach has however proved to be less effective in the short term because of the country's already compromised fiscal position. Burger and Calit (2021) also reject this view citing that although increased expenditure will generally stimulate economic growth, the current public expenditure/GDP ratio exceeds the level at which an increase in the ratio will positively impacts growth and eventually create employment. The 2021 World Bank Report records that pandemic has increased South Africa's unemployment situation with many unemployed people having stopped looking for work altogether (World Bank Group, 2020: 4).

### **The informal economy**

Whilst it is true that the South African Government has traditionally supported the informal sector, one may argue that the ball was dropped during the COVID-19 pandemic. Khambule (2020) posits that the government's support for small business has been evident in their commitment to creating a conducive environment for the informal sector and is driven by the recognition that the informal economy plays a leading role in absorbing low-skilled workers throughout developing countries. There is also a general perception that the informal economy is protected from economic shocks such as pandemics because self-employment does not necessarily react to downturns (Niyimbanira, 2017). This proved to be untrue during the national lockdown when many informal businesses were closed because they were considered non-essential services.

The government was heavily criticised for lacking empathy for the informal economy during the national lockdown (Bhorat & Köhler, 2020). The criticism was mainly due to shutting down of some sections of the informal economy including food vendors who provide services similar to those provided by big corporations although at a small community scale. The government has since revised its regulations to include some informal business (Khambule, 2020:101-102). The government's initial decision to shut down and limit business activity had a far-reaching impact including on rural informal businesses. Munzhedzi and Phago (2020:193) postulate that the economic lockdown rules imposed by Section 27(2) of the Disaster Management Act, 2002 (Act 57 of 2002) forced many popular businesses in the rural areas such as spaza

shops, hair salons and street hawkers to not operate and is expected to have further severe impact on the local economy. Many small businesses struggled to meet the conditions of the regulations and therefore their operation during the period was deemed uncompliant. The south African government was also criticised for not offering enough financial support and resources to the informal and small business sectors (Bhorat & Köhler, 2020). According to the Auditor-General's (2021) report, 1.7 billion rand had been made available for support to small businesses in April 2020 but only R308,7 million had been spent by 30 September 2020. It is unclear how much of that money went to informal businesses and through what channels.

### **Expanded social assistance**

While acknowledging the positive role that the extended social assistance played during the pandemic in South Africa, there is no evidence that the costly initiative will have any economic impact. Stanwix (2020:182) indicates that while social grants have generally had a varied range of positive impacts and similarly during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing social and economic challenges in the country as a result of the COVID-19 crisis are less likely to disappear in the short term. In fact, they are likely to deepen the staggering structural unemployment and inequalities and increase demand for large cash transfers to help support the poor at household level. The country's limited budget means the current social assistance without a broad-based economic recovery strategy that encourages inclusive economic growth and improve productive employment will have little to impact on poverty and inequality. Furthermore, the extended social assistance programme during the pandemic may also create new challenges during the termination of grants at some point without a proper support strategy in place. Jeke and Wanju (2021) also support this view by arguing that no clear relation can be established at a macro level between social grants and economic growth particularly in developing countries. This is despite the fact that social grants play an important role in supporting the poor and other vulnerable sections of the population, strengthening their livelihood strategies and improving their productive activity, including those in the informal sector. Grants also allow for some flexibility when the money received can help the poor maintain economic activity and mitigate against shock. This however is not always the case because economic growth is dependent on a variety of factors and therefore only certain types of social transfers can have some positive impact on the economic trajectory.

### **Recommendations for future pandemics**

The challenges, shock and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been so massive all over the globe including in South Africa. Recommendations are developed in order to assist in to adequately addressing the many challenges confronted during the COVID-19 pandemic including but not limited to unemployment and low economic performance.

- Small businesses must be given greater support. With sufficient financial and other supports, small businesses may play a huge role in creating much needed jobs. Thriving small businesses sector means stable local economies which will ultimately create jobs. Other forms of support could be in the form of skilling,

training and protection of small businesses through legislation.

- Corrupt practices must be adequately addressed through judicial means. Most of the monies which could be invested with greater return in others sectors in the economy are stolen through various corrupt means. Munzhedzi (2016) has equated public procurement and corruption as inseparable twins. This due to the fact that most of the corruption in the public sector is found in public procurement. Public accountability mechanisms must be capacitated to ensure that those alleged with corrupt activities must be held to account using existing policy frameworks.
- Tax incentives for labour intensive sectors. Labour intensive sectors include mining and agriculture in the context of South Africa. These sectors must be incentivised for creating new jobs in their respective sectors. Incentivising could be in the form of allowing companies affected to get tax rebates. This could motivate them to create more labour intensive jobs. This may have a greater effect in the economy because more jobs would be created.
- Create an enabling environment for the economy to thrive. Government policies and regulations must not stifle entrepreneurial and economic activities, instead they should be encouraged. The bureaucratic processes in government must be relaxed to allow entrepreneurial spirit to thrive. Tedious and expensive procedures in registering a new business must not be what dampens the potential businesses which could have been successful and created jobs.

The foregoing recommendations may assist a great deal in mitigating the enormous effects of COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. These effects are likely going to be felt for a long time to come if drastic measures in the form of these recommendations are not introduced. Many remain unemployed and poor as a result of the effects of the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

This paper sought to explore the effects of COVID-19 in the South African job market economy. Further to that, the paper sought to review the government's efforts in mitigating the economic impacts of the pandemic and resulting unemployment hike. The exploration was undertaken through the review of existing literature and several reports. The argument put forward in the paper is that South Africa's overall economic response to the pandemic has been insufficient particularly in the labour market despite the many sizable social and economic relief measures. The discussion alluded to some of the efforts by government including but not limited to grants and UIF reliefs. However, the reliefs have not made a sufficient dent in the shrinking economy and the growing unemployment. The unemployment of the previously marginalised continues to grow at an alarming rate. The paper proposed recommendations which seeks to boost the economy not only to address the COVID-19 pandemic effects, but to mitigate the effects of any future economic setbacks South Africa might be encounter. The paper also proposes recommendations to alleviate the ever-increasing unemployment rate.

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