

Xenophobia in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic: How the pandemic increases zero-sum bias about foreign nationals

Summary

When the COVID-19 pandemic reached the shores of South Africa, the government responded quickly. Although proactive government policies saved thousands of lives, the health and economic implications of the pandemic have been (and continue to be) devastating. As the state implements its vaccination programme and begins to rebuild the economy, it is worth asking whether this current crisis has made South Africans more suspicious of outsiders. Has it made us more likely to see the world as a zero-sum contest between insiders and outsiders? To provide insight into this issue, this policy brief will examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected zero-sum thinking about foreign nationals.

The belief that one group's gain is another group's loss is a dangerous viewpoint. Instead of viewing outsiders as potential collaborators with shared interests, it incentivises distrust of, and conflict with, others. The shock of the current COVID-19 crisis could have led to a surge in this way of thinking, exacerbating intergroup tension. Little is known, however, about

the effect that mass disease-related threats have on human psychology. Using innovative public opinion data, this policy brief explored how the pandemic changed the way ordinary people think about non-nationals. The policy brief offered an assessment of this change and provides a set of recommendations to assist policymakers tackle xenophobia in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

Introduction

At the time of writing, millions have been infected with COVID-19 and more than 90,000 thousand have died in South Africa as a result of the disease. The state implemented a series of interventions to mitigate the effects of the pandemic such as closing national borders, imposing strict lockdowns and redirecting scarce national resources to support businesses and ordinary citizens. Despite the introduction of state-funded aid programmes, the economic fallout has been dire. The national economy, measured in terms of gross domestic product, shrank by 7% during 2020. Businesses have failed and joblessness has grown. The country's

unemployment rate has reached its highest level since the beginning of Statistics South Africa's quarterly labour force surveys in 2008.¹

Large-scale viral pandemics present a serious threat to the existing social order, prompting a sense of emergency amongst the general population. Although such pandemics can inspire acts of solidarity and empathy, they can also instil fear and distrust of outsiders. The existing research on pathogen stress suggests that a pandemic (like COVID-19) would alter how people see non-nationals, making them less generous towards this group and more willing to exclude them (Esses & Hamilton 2021). Even before the outbreak of the current crisis, anti-immigrant sentiment was high in South Africa. Using comprehensive public opinion data, Gordon (2015) detailed high levels of antipathy towards foreign nationals in the last decade. This work shows that foreigners are blamed, in particular, for poor material conditions in the country and are seen as a driver of unemployment and a drain on the welfare state (also see Gordon 2019).

Data

In order to better understand zero-sum beliefs about non-nationals, data from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS 2021) will be used. SASAS has been designed to yield a representative sample of 3 500 adult South African citizens aged 16 and older (with no upper age limit), in households geographically spread across the country's nine provinces. The sampling frame used for the survey was based on the 2011 census and produced a realised sample of 2 988 in the 2020 round.

1. For a discussion of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the South African economy, particularly on the labour market, please see a recent report from the World Bank Group (2021).

The fieldwork schedule for SASAS 2020 allowed for a test of how the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected public attitudes. Fieldwork for the SASAS 2020 round began in late February 2020 but was halted when President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the national lockdown on 27 March 2020. Approximately 40% of interviews had been completed at this time. After approximately six months, on 21 September 2020, restrictions were lowered to Alert Level 1 and the HSRC deemed it safe to resume fieldwork. As a result of these delays, the SASAS fieldwork round was only completed on 15 February 2021.

Thinking about loss and gain

SASAS participants were asked questions on whether they felt that immigrants' success in accessing welfare or employment reduced opportunities for everyone else in the country. In addition, respondents were queried on whether they thought that when immigrants open businesses, it means less business opportunities for everyone else. Only a minority of the population demonstrated a zero-sum bias on these questions, with many people opposing the position that a foreigner's gain would be another's loss.

Empirical research shows that zero-sum thinking about international migration tends to be wrong. A study from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in partnership with the International Labour Organization (OECD-ILO) (2018) found that inflows of foreign nationals had a positive effect on labour market opportunities for the native-born.² In other words,

2. The results of this study are consistent with a World Bank study on the South African labour market during the 1996–2011 period (Hovhannisyan et al. 2018). This finding also corresponds with empirical research in other countries which finds that international migration is positively linked with economic growth (Bradford 2021).

international immigration seems to have created jobs for locals. Moreover, this study concluded that international migration had a net positive impact on public finances. This may be due to the fact that foreign nationals were found to pay more in (especially income and value-added) taxes than locals.

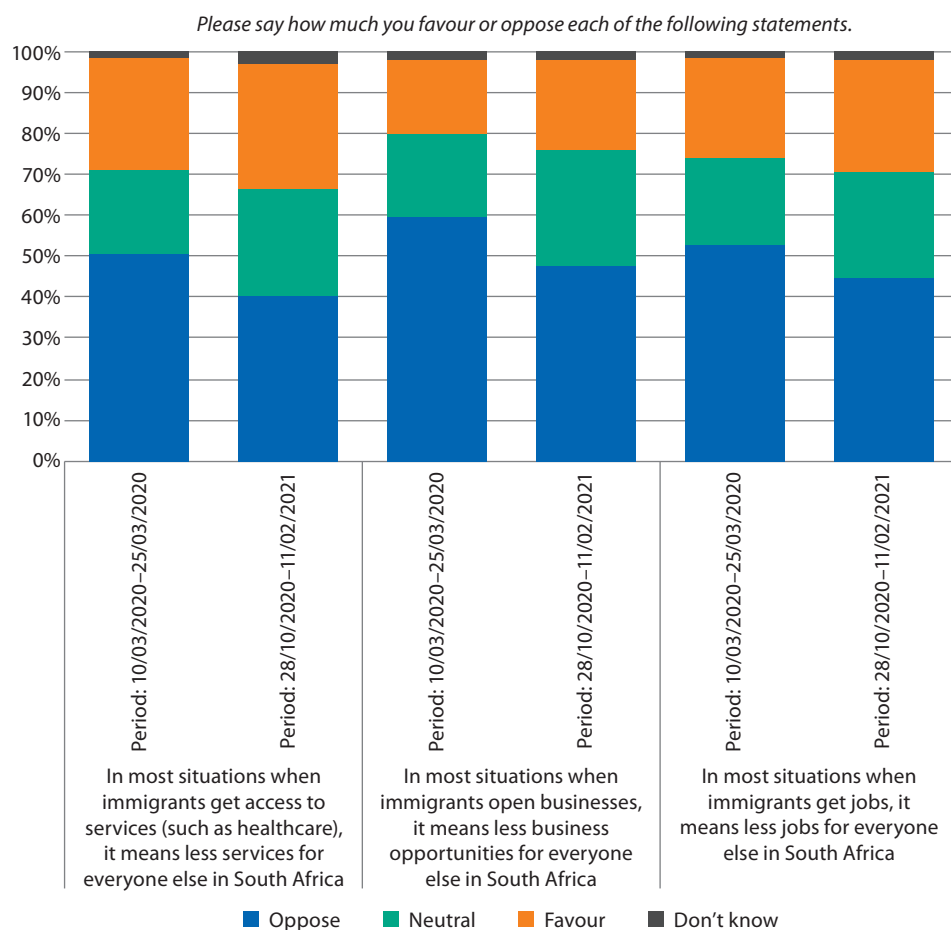
If the SASAS 2020 data from the first wave (10 March 2020 to 25 March 2020) is compared to that from the second wave (28 October 2020 to 11 February 2021), a disturbing phenomenon can be observed (Figure 1). Opposition to zero-sum thinking appears to have declined between these two waves, falling quite substantially in most incidences. However, a considerable increase in support for zero-sum thinking is not observed. The uncertainty of the pandemic period seems to have increased the tendency of certain parts of the population to be undecided on how to answer the question. This outcome is consistent with past research on the link between pathogen stress and discriminatory attitudes.³

Tracking zero-sum bias

In order to adequately examine zero-sum thinking about foreigners in the adult population, a composite index was created using the three items showcased in Figure 1. Arranged on a 0 to 10 scale, the higher the value on the indicator, the greater the likelihood an individual will view immigrants as competitors for scarce resources. The national mean score on the Zero-Sum Bias Scale was 4.54 (SE=0.083). The adult populace was segmented into four groups based on

3. According to this body of knowledge, at the individual level, pathogen threat can translate into a willingness to distance yourself from, and be suspicious towards, strangers (Schaller & Duncan 2011). Past research shows that if study participants experience experimentally primed disease salience, this appears to boost xenophobic attitudes (also see Faulkner et al. 2004).

Figure 1: Public levels of support and opposition to 'zero-sum thinking' statements by time period



their score on this metric. About two-fifths (43%) of the general public was located in Lower Middle (2.6–5) group and 25% in the Low (0–2.5) group. A third of the adult population was found in the Upper Middle (5.1–7.5) and High (7.6–10) groups.

Demographic, geographic and socio-economic differences between the four Zero-Sum Bias Scale cohorts are showcased in Table 1. It was apparent that zero-sum thinking was prevalent across the major social and economic fault lines of South African society. Some important group differences are, however, evident. High zero-sum bias was found to be particularly prevalent amongst older people, the less educated and those living in Mpumalanga. Although the youth did not, on average, score high on the Zero-Sum Bias Scale, the attitudes of young people were

the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The proportion of the 16–24 age cohort located in the Upper Middle and High groups fell by 11% between the first and second SASAS 2020 waves. Other groups that experienced a significant increase in Zero-Sum Bias Scale scores were those with completed secondary education and the black African majority.

Entitlement to welfare

One of the most important questions surrounding international migration into many countries concerns whether foreigners should receive the same access to social welfare as native-born citizens. The preference for restricting (or denying altogether) the access of the foreign-born to state services (such as healthcare, housing or social grants) has been labelled 'welfare chauvinism'

(Kymlicka 2015). This form of chauvinism has been a destructive element in the politics of a number of different nations, leading to the rise of right-wing populism (also see Greve 2019). Past public opinion research from the HSRC identified welfare chauvinism as a problem in South Africa (Gordon 2021).

To examine support for welfare chauvinism amongst the general population, the following question was introduced into SASAS: 'Thinking of people coming to live in South Africa from other countries, when do you think they should obtain the same rights to social grants and services as citizens already living here?' About two-fifths (38%) of the population selected the most exclusionary option, stating that they should never get the same rights. Nearly a quarter (23%) believed that such rights can only be accessed when immigrants obtain citizenship. An eighth of the populace said it should be based upon reciprocity and 8% told fieldworkers that foreigners need to live in the country for a year before these rights can be granted. Only a small minority (12%) took an unrestricted position on welfare access for foreigners.

There is a strong correlation between zero-sum bias and welfare chauvinism. As can be observed from Table 2, zero-sum thinking was positively associated with a preference to want to exclude foreigners from the South African welfare system. If an individual was in the High or Upper Middle Zero-Sum Bias Scale groups, in other words, then they were far more liable to adopt the most extreme chauvinist position than their counterparts. Being located in the Low group, by contrast, was correlated with embracing the most liberal stance on this issue. Even if advanced statistical techniques were applied to control for sociodemographic characteristics, a positive relationship between the Zero-Sum Bias Scale and welfare chauvinism was found.

Table 1: Proportion of different subgroups across the four 'Zero-Sum Bias Scale' cohorts

	Low (0–2.5)		Lower Middle (2.6–5)		Upper Middle (5.1–7.5)		High (7.6–10)	
Total	25	(1.24)	43	(1.45)	16	(1.02)	17	(1.13)
Gender								
Male	26	(1.95)	43	(2.28)	16	(1.63)	15	(1.71)
Female	24	(1.56)	42	(1.81)	16	(1.25)	19	(1.50)
Age group								
16–24	23	(2.98)	47	(3.67)	13	(2.44)	17	(2.58)
25–34	26	(2.47)	41	(2.80)	18	(2.26)	14	(2.10)
35–49	25	(2.34)	44	(2.54)	17	(1.77)	14	(1.70)
50–64	23	(2.87)	37	(3.32)	18	(2.26)	22	(3.64)
65+	23	(3.16)	43	(3.95)	12	(2.27)	23	(3.50)
Population group								
Black African	25	(1.48)	41	(1.71)	16	(1.20)	18	(1.37)
Coloured	30	(3.02)	47	(3.19)	14	(2.43)	9	(1.76)
Indian	19	(4.11)	50	(4.79)	23	(3.96)	8	(1.71)
White	18	(3.35)	47	(4.54)	19	(3.16)	16	(3.29)
Educational attainment								
Some primary or less	22	(2.54)	38	(3.23)	16	(2.33)	25	(2.95)
Some secondary	25	(2.30)	44	(2.65)	15	(1.85)	16	(1.88)
Completed secondary	26	(2.06)	42	(2.37)	17	(1.75)	16	(1.97)
Post-secondary	24	(3.11)	44	(3.63)	17	(2.24)	16	(2.65)
Province of residence								
Western Cape	30	(3.07)	45	(3.29)	13	(2.27)	12	(2.15)
Eastern Cape	27	(3.37)	42	(4.20)	11	(2.34)	20	(3.25)
Northern Cape	21	(3.74)	43	(4.38)	21	(3.65)	15	(3.43)
Free State	26	(4.23)	45	(4.73)	21	(3.96)	7	(1.95)
KwaZulu-Natal	21	(2.86)	41	(3.25)	19	(2.63)	19	(2.63)
Gauteng	16	(3.28)	48	(5.41)	18	(3.18)	18	(6.71)
North West	25	(2.91)	43	(3.45)	17	(2.45)	15	(2.28)
Limpopo	32	(4.71)	56	(4.68)	8	(1.84)	5	(1.46)
Mpumalanga	19	(3.34)	26	(3.67)	18	(2.94)	37	(4.17)

Note: Linearised standard errors are in parenthesis. Values above the national average are shaded in blue.

Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has fuelled zero-sum bias in South Africa, a perilous change in the public mindset. Zero-sum thinking makes people less generous and open-minded, and more predisposed to conflict. Moreover, this worldview is just incorrect. Current existing empirical economic scholarship shows that international immigration often has a positive-sum effect on the national economy. We need to address this shift in attitudes caused by the pandemic, and the HSRC proposes the following interventions to change public views on this issue:

1. There is a need to recognise welfare chauvinism as a distinct problem in South Africa, with a significant minority adopting an extreme position. More must be done to reduce this form of chauvinism by promoting a **more progressive and inclusive vision of social welfare** in the country. This would be in line with the South African Constitution and our existing legislative framework.
2. Elected leaders should be **discouraged from promoting anti-immigrant attitudes** by blaming resource scarcity on international migration. This form of scapegoating endorses dangerous kinds of zero-sum bias amongst the general public that threaten intergroup relations, preventing compromise and encouraging conflict.
3. A significant number of people adopt a middling position on zero-sum thinking about foreigners; this group should be the most open to changing their mind on this subject. The goal should be targeting this group with specially designed **communication campaigns**. The present study has mapped the sociodemographic characteristics

Table 2: Public responses to the question: 'Thinking of people coming to live in South Africa from other countries, when do you think they should obtain the same rights to social grants and services as citizens already living here?' by Zero-Sum Bias Scale groups (column percentages)

	Low (0-2.5)	Lower Middle (2.6-5)	Upper Middle (5.1-7.5)	High (7.6-10)	Total
Immediately on arrival	19.9 (2.47)	11.9 (1.79)	3.9 (0.91)	6.7 (1.60)	11.7 (1.04)
After living in South Africa for a year	8.0 (1.54)	10.3 (1.42)	5.2 (1.36)	2.0 (0.91)	7.5 (0.77)
Only after they have worked and paid taxes for at least a year	8.4 (1.29)	17.6 (1.59)	11.5 (2.32)	6.5 (1.45)	12.5 (0.88)
Once they have become a South African citizen	21.5 (2.44)	21.7 (1.70)	28.0 (2.80)	21.4 (3.07)	22.6 (1.16)
They should never get the same rights	33.7 (2.71)	30.4 (2.06)	45.8 (3.46)	58.5 (3.60)	38.4 (1.43)
(Can't choose)	8.5 (1.69)	8.2 (1.37)	5.6 (1.45)	4.8 (1.47)	7.3 (0.80)
	100	100	100	100	100

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis. Values above the national average are shaded in blue.

of this group, and using this data it should be possible to design targeted messaging tailored for these people.

- We still do not know enough about how large-scale viral pandemics influence attitudes towards international migrants. As the general economy is rebuilt following the COVID-19 pandemic and the vaccination programmes begin to achieve their targets, there is a need to **regularly monitor citizens' attitudes** on zero-sum thinking. This is essential to evaluate and enhance the impact and effectiveness of recovery programmes on existing levels of xenophobia.

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