Many parents echoed this, citing concern around overcrowded classrooms, infrastructure, hygiene and the ability or willingness of children to maintain a physical distance from each other:

“What worries me the most... is how are they going to handle the situation in class? Especially in [certain schools] where children are 40 in one class; it is havoc and it would spread the virus easily.”

“Poor personal hygiene. Children won’t follow social-distancing regulations. Rural schools won’t cope with COVID-19 due to lack of infrastructure and sanitation.”

Despite the coronavirus causing no symptoms or mild disease in most children, some parents expressed fears about the unknown or danger of COVID-19, especially where children had underlying conditions:

“I’d never send my child to school...” — parent (40 yrs)

“No, I won’t send my child to school. My daughter is asthmatic and no infrastructure and sanitisation. She will not be able to comply with the rules...” — parent (40 yrs)

“Poor personal hygiene. Children will not know certain things at school. ” — parent (40 yrs)

“Poor personal hygiene. Children will not know certain things at school. ” — parent (40 yrs)

“What worries me is that in our school there are many students and I don’t think social distancing and the ‘no touching rule’ can be met due to the numbers at our school” — learner (17 yrs)

“I am looking forward to catching up with my school work and ensuring that I am on the right track” — learner (17 yrs)

“I want to learn [...] because we are left behind with school work and we will not know certain things at school” — learner (7 yrs)

Way forward?
The implementation of this study was facilitated through social media, which provides an excellent platform for people of all ages to communicate with each other safely during this pandemic.

The importance of this work lies in its ability to encourage South Africans to tell and showcase their stories of how their lives have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pictures are particularly captivating and revealing, because they display the participants’ experiences and perceptions with minimal interference from the researchers (besides posing research questions). In this way, we can enhance the ‘participant voice’ and share children’s, teenagers’ and adults’ stories of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their lives.

The study is ongoing and we hope to learn more about the implications that national regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have on the lives of everyday South Africans.

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Children know about protection
The following responses were shared by child participants when asked to show things that they would do to ensure that they did not get the coronavirus:

“Wash your hands, keep safe and not carry the germs and always wash your hands.”

“Wear a mask.”

“My sister and I wear masks when we exit the house.”

“My child and I wear masks when we exit the house.”

“Take a mask.”

“Wash your hands, keep safe and not carry the germs and always wash your hands.”

“Wear a mask.”

“Wash your hands, keep safe and not carry the germs and always wash your hands.”

“Wear a mask.”

“Wash your hands, keep safe and not carry the germs and always wash your hands.”

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“Wear a mask.”
South Africa (SA)’s economic downturn began before the COVID-19-related recession started engulfing the world economy. Given the severity of the current recession, SA will not escape domestic socio-economic turmoil, like any other middle-income economy heavily dependent on exporting natural resources. Early forecasts suggest that the domestic macroeconomic crisis will be longer and deeper than predictions made in the February 2020 budget. The correlated health and economic crises in an unequal society will aggravate the depressed living standards of many.

The 2019 downturn repeated a well-known pattern: when economic output slumps, it triggers an expansion in unemployment. With rare exceptions, this inverse relationship characterises the typical boom and bust cycles of economies. Figure 1 confirms the case in SA, at least for 2019. Monthly and quarterly fluctuations in output appear erratic and without a clear trend for 2015–2019, as the quarterly line shows. These fluctuations might reflect statistical ‘noise’ intrinsic to short-term data, but also point to quarterly macroeconomic instabilities with heightened risks and uncertainties that often ignite spillover economic shocks.

In contrast, the jobless rate has steadily climbed to above 26% and worsened significantly since the last quarter of 2018. By the end of 2019, the unemployment rate registered a second percentage-point increase compared to 2018, with no prospect of any quick reversal. COVID-19-related restrictions on physical movement and non-registered a two percentage-points increase compared to 2018. By the end of 2019, the unemployment rate might reflect statistical ‘noise’ intrinsic to short-term output appears erratic and without a clear trend for 2015–2019. A synchronised downturn in economic growth began after 2007 marking the onset of the Great Recession. Even though the speed of the economic downturn varied across regions and countries, the magnitude of the decline was so severe that the average world growth rate moved into negative territory. By 2009, as Figure 2 illustrates, SA and major economies in Latin America, as well as the United States and many European economies, had fallen into deep recession.

Puzzling is why SA’s unstable and fragile growth pattern matches trends in Latin American economies rather than experiences among its Sub-Saharan neighbours. Also, while SA bounced back to positive growth in 2010 (with the rest of the world), the country’s growth rate hovered around 1% post-2010, on the cliff-edge of sliding into a new recession. Commentators agonised about the uneven recoveries, with almost every macroeconomic model forecasting a double-dip recession on the horizon. Even though only Latin America fell into recession in 2015 and 2016, SA and many developed economies failed to escape increasing vulnerability to another economic shock.

This unevenness is unsurprising, and primarily reflects widespread variations in the sectoral composition of economic activity/productivity differences and economic cycles. Figure 2 shows that from 2006 to 2018 average yearly rates of global economic growth fluctuated between 1.86% and 4.37% during ‘moments of prosperity’. However, economic growth is uneven across regions and countries, with Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia & Pacific outperforming Latin America. This unevenness is unsurprising, and primarily reflects widespread variations in the sectoral composition of economic activity/productivity differences and economic cycles. Figure 2 shows that from 2006 to 2018 average yearly rates of global economic growth fluctuated between 1.86% and 4.37% during ‘moments of prosperity’. However, economic growth is uneven across regions and countries, with Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia & Pacific outperforming Latin America. This unevenness is unsurprising, and primarily reflects widespread variations in the sectoral composition of economic activity/productivity differences and economic cycles.

SA’s unemployment-recession puzzle in context

Is SA’s economic growth-unemployment puzzle, coupled with the macroeconomic interventions demanded in recessions, exceptional? This question is particularly important for detailing evidence-informed policies that stand to be enriched through learning from policy experiences accumulated during past recessionary cycles. Figure 2 shows that from 2006 to 2018 average yearly rates of global economic growth fluctuated between 1.86% and 4.37% during ‘moments of prosperity’. However, economic growth is uneven across regions and countries, with Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia & Pacific outperforming Latin America. This unevenness is unsurprising, and primarily reflects widespread variations in the sectoral composition of economic activity/productivity differences and economic cycles. Figure 2 shows that from 2006 to 2018 average yearly rates of global economic growth fluctuated between 1.86% and 4.37% during ‘moments of prosperity’. However, economic growth is uneven across regions and countries, with Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia & Pacific outperforming Latin America. This unevenness is unsurprising, and primarily reflects widespread variations in the sectoral composition of economic activity/productivity differences and economic cycles.

Finding lasting solutions to SA’s jobs-growth puzzle has become more pressing. Economic growth might be necessary for job creation, but it has not been sufficient to solve SA’s unemployment crisis.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, prevention of an additional decline in aggregate employment and turning this around is high on the agenda of SA’s policymakers. The unequal effects of COVID-19 on employment in different sectors calls for a disaggregated framework of employment generation. Tough questions must also be answered about the composition of forces driving economic output and how these factors interactively translate into sustainable jobs. This debate also pivots on whether employment is a function of economic output, or economic output is a function of labour input. To avoid a circular reasoning trap, the mechanics at work in these chain reactions must be dissected, coupled with looking at why a shift in the outcome variable might lag behind change in the input variable.