



MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, February 2021

Graduated measures of regulating mobility: lockdown and easing up in South Africa during COVID-19

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Abstract

The 21-day national lockdown to halt the spread of COVID in South Africa did not end abruptly, but instead it has been eased progressively through four levels of mobility policies. These easing policies ranged from reduction of curfew hours, progressive uplifting of mobility and international flights bans, and the authorization of businesses and social/recreational centers to operate.

Keywords

Lockdown, easing, immobility policies, South Africa, COVID-19

To be quoted as:

Tardzenyuy Thomas, Mengnjo. 2021. Graduated measures of regulating mobility: lockdown and easing up in South Africa during COVID-19. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

Doi: 10.48509/MoLab.1272

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The COVID-19 outbreak in South Africa first made public on March 5 2020² prompted the government to introduce one of the most stringent measures to curb the spread of the virus in the world. President Cyril Ramaphosa announced on March 23 that the entire country would be placed under a 21-day lockdown. The main immobility measures included:

- Individuals were only allowed to leave home under strictly controlled circumstances;
- Temporary shelters that met necessary hygiene standards were built for homeless people;
- All non-essential shops and businesses were closed;
- Any citizens arriving from high-risk countries had to quarantine for 14 days;
- Visitors arriving on flights from high-risk countries were denied entry;
- International flights to Lanseria Airport were temporarily suspended; and
- International travelers from high-risk countries had to quarantine for 14 days in a hotel;

A variety of worker categories, like those in security and supply chain services, were deemed exempt. The lockdown was enforced by the South African National Defense Force with aid from police³. And in terms of compliance, it was largely effective: in a study carried out by the South African Department for Statistics on the social impact of COVID-19 on mobility, migration, and education, 88% of South Africans reported that they did not move across provincial boundaries during the lockdown, while 12% of them noted that they moved to other provinces⁴.

Easing immobility policies after the 21 days national lockdown

The 21-day lockdown was phased out progressively through a number of steps. These measures are referred to as “*easing policies*.” They were aimed at balancing the need to resume economic activities with the desire to contain the virus. According to President Ramaphosa, easing lockdown was relevant since “our people need to eat. They need to earn a living. Companies need to produce and to trade, they need to guarantee revenue to keep employees in employment.”⁵ These policies were adopted on the basis of risk-adjustment strategy proposed by the National Corona Command Council that designated four “*easing levels*,” each of which allows for certain types of mobilities and prohibits others. The easing levels began on May 1 from level 4; June 1, from level 3; August 17, from level 2; and on September 21, they were at level 1⁶.

² Bafetane, Vusi. 2020. SA coronavirus case came via Dubai to Durban: Mkhize. *MSN*. 6 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.msn.com/en-za/news/national/sa-coronavirus-case-came-via-dubai-to-durban-mkhize/ar-BB10OnRG?li=BBqfP3n>. Last accessed 9 November 2020.

³ Statement By President Cyril Ramaphosa.

⁴ Statistics South Africa. 2020. *SA loses more than 600K formal sector jobs during COVID-19 lockdown*. 15 October 2020. Available online at: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=13690>. Last accessed 23 November 2020.

⁵ Staff Writer. 2020. Read South Africa’s full level 4 lockdown restrictions here. *Business Tech*. 25 April 2020. Available online at: <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/392831/read-south-africas-full-level-4-lockdown-restrictions-here/>. Last accessed 9 November 2020.

⁶ President Cyril Ramaphosa. 2020. *Developments in South Africa's risk-adjusted strategy to manage the spread of Coronavirus COVID-19*. 24 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-developments-south-africa%E2%80%99s-risk-adjusted-strategy-manage-spread>. Last accessed 9 November 2020.

Here's how they worked:

Level 4 easing of the national lockdown policy

During level 4, curfews ran from 20:00 PM until 05:00 the next morning, every day. Outside of that time frame, people were only allowed to leave their residence to perform essential services, or go to work if they had a permit. For exercise, residents could walk, run, or cycle between 06:00 AM and 09:00 AM, within a 5 km of their place of residence. Public transport was allowed to continue, and gatherings were limited to 50 for events like funerals and weddings. Movement between provinces and municipalities were only allowed for close family and partners with permit.

Level 3 easing of the national lockdown policy

In level 3, ground-level realities changed even more. Curfew was shortened from 21:00 PM until 04:00 AM. Movements were similarly limited, except residents could attend a place of worship and school or learning institution, if it was in the same province. Gatherings still followed the same rules. And now, personal care services, restaurants (sit-down only), conferences and meetings, and cultural institutions (cinemas, theatres, libraries, etc.) were once again allowed to operate.

Level 2 easing of the national lockdown policy

Level 2 saw a closer semblance of 'normalcy' than previously. All restrictions on inter-provincial travel were lifted, and accommodation could reopen with approved protocols. Hospitality venues (restaurants, bars, etc.) could operate as well. Family and social visits could be made, but with caution, and exercise centres could reopen under new guidance. However, the curfew still continued overnight, as did the prohibition on gatherings over 50 people. International travel also did not resume⁷.

Level 1 easing of the national lockdown policy

Level 1 easing is the closest the country has achieved to 'normal' mobility during the COVID lockdown. Most normal activities are allowed to resume, within certain prescribed and health guidelines. Gatherings are now allowed with higher quantities: 250 people are allowed at indoor events; 500 people are allowed at outdoor events; physical exercise, recreation and entertainment venues are allowed to operate at 50% capacity. Yet sports restrictions are still at Level 3 and 100 people are allowed at funerals. Meanwhile, international travel restrictions have been eased⁸.

⁷ Business Tech. 2020. *South Africa moves to level 2 lockdown on Monday – here are the new rules*. 19 August 2020. Available online at: <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/425708/south-africa-moves-to-level-2-lockdown-on-monday-here-are-the-new-rules/>. Last accessed 9 November 2020.

⁸ Staff Writer. 2020. *South Africa moves to lockdown level 1 – here are the changes*. *Business Tech*. 16 September 2020. Available online at: <https://businesstech.co.za/news/trending/433943/south-africa-moves-to-lockdown-level-1-here-are-the-changes/>. Last accessed 09 November 2020.

Many economic and socio-cultural activities have resumed in South Africa as a result of these four levels of mobility policies, although concerns over increasing cases of COVID-19 have resurfaced since. At the end of December, the country had registered 1,004,413 infections, thereby being the first country in Africa to register more than one million cases⁹. It has proved that while the easing policies provide a guidebook to how mobility could slowly and safely return in a post-COVID world, no guidebook on handling the pandemic is perfectly written.

⁹ BBC News. 2020. *Covid: South Africa passes one million infections as cases surge*. 28 December 2020. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55462863>. Last accessed 02 January 2021