

## NAVIGATING A GLOBAL CRISIS AWAY FROM HOME: CHALLENGES AND COPING MECHANISMS OF FOREIGN NATIONALS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SOUTH AFRICA

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at the experiences of foreign nationals in South Africa during the COVID-19 lockdown by exploring the challenges they faced and the coping mechanisms they employed. The COVID-19 lockdown affected almost everyone living in South Africa, but foreign nationals who often have pre-existing vulnerabilities seem to have been severely affected. Existing studies show the impact of COVID-19 on locals, and limited research shows the impacts of the lockdown on foreign nationals and how they handled such challenges in South Africa. This paper uses the social networks theory to understand how foreign nationals have dealt with COVID-19-induced challenges. Methodologically, the paper used qualitative methodology where data was collected through document analysis and in-depth interviews with foreign nationals from various African countries. The key findings are that foreign nationals faced challenges like limited access to healthcare facilities, hunger, loss of employment, xenophobia and their social networks helped them to cope with these challenges. The paper concludes that the South African government lacked the political will to handle the challenges faced by foreign nationals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the government should show political will in future pandemics or state of emergency by ensuring that what it promises, its policies and its practice align.

**Keywords:** *Lockdown, COVID-19, South Africa, social networks, foreign nationals, strong ties, weak ties.*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the challenges foreign nationals faced and the coping mechanisms they employed during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa (SA). SA recorded its first COVID-19 case on 1 March 2020 and 18 days later the number of cases rose to 402 cases (Modisenyane et al., 2022). This rapid increase in COVID-19 cases prompted the president of SA Cyril Ramaphosa to announce a national lockdown on 23 March 2020 to stop the spread of the virus and to prepare the health systems for a surge of COVID-19 cases (Mukumbang et al., 2020). Even though the COVID-19 lockdown has affected everybody living in SA, foreign nationals who are a population with pre-



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existing vulnerabilities were severely affected (Mukumbang et al., 2020). Foreign nationals are vulnerable because they often lack ample means to cushion themselves from the negative effects of the pandemic (Mutekwe, 2022).

The South African government's response to the pandemic included a stimulus package worth R500 billion, a temporary employer/employee relief scheme funded by the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), compensation fund benefits for contracting the coronavirus occupationally, and an increase in the value of existing social assistance grants (Olivier & Govindjee, 2022). A special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant (SRDG) of R350 per month was also introduced for unemployed citizens, permanent residents, and refugees, excluding various categories of non-citizens (Gronbach, Seekings, & Megannon, 2022). However, there is a lack of studies showing the utility of such relief measures on foreign nationals and the means of coping they employed in cases where they may not have accessed such government relief measures. This paper articulates foreign nationals' COVID-19 challenges, coping mechanisms, and experiences in accessing government relief measures in SA.

Studies on foreign nationals during the COVID-19 pandemic in SA have focused mainly on the challenges they faced (Olivier & Govindjee, 2022; Msabah, 2022; Kavuro, 2022; Mushomi et al., 2022; Mukumbang et al., 2020) without detailing their coping mechanisms. In this regard, literature shows that the phenomenon of foreign nationals during COVID-19 was complicated and characterised by economic, health, and protection crises (UN, 2020). For instance, foreigners faced challenges like job losses and reduced income (Mutekwe, 2022; Jobsen et al., 2021), limited access to healthcare facilities and vaccines (Mushomi et al., 2022), xenophobia, expired documentation, arrests, and deportations (Gordon, 2024), and housing and food challenges (Schotte & Zizzamia, 2022; Hart et al., 2022). In addition, studies that focused on both challenges and coping mechanisms like Mutekwe (2022) do not ground such experiences with a theoretical explanation. Therefore, this study provides both challenges and coping mechanisms read through social networks theory.

Previous studies on foreign nationals and their social networks focused on relationships between their existing networks in the country of destination and the decisions involved when migrating (Bakewell, 2009; Klvanova, 2009) or on the role of social networks in facilitating the integration process of foreign nationals in their destination (Hoang, 2011; Ryan, 2011). These studies have used social networks theory in contexts other than SA, while a study by Nystrom (2012) in Johannesburg, SA highlighted the importance of social networks throughout the entire migration process. Similarly, Muchemwa (2017) and Muchemwa and Batisai (2024) focused on the role of social networks in residential choice amongst Zimbabweans residing in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, SA. This paper adds to literature on foreign nationals and social networks theory by focusing on how foreign nationals used their social networks to cope with COVID-19-induced challenges in SA. To explore foreign nationals' challenges and coping mechanisms, this paper is guided by the following objectives.

- To explore the challenges faced by foreign nationals in SA during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To examine how foreign nationals in SA coped with COVID-19-induced challenges.

The paper argues that foreign nationals in SA faced socio-economic, health, and protection-related challenges and they struggled to access government relief measures. As a result, they relied on their social networks (families, friends, colleagues, and kinsmen) for survival during the pandemic. This paper starts with a review of the literature and an explanation of the social network theory. Next, the paper provides an outline of the methodology, followed by a presentation, discussion, and analysis of the findings before concluding the paper.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Challenges of foreigners in other contexts**

Literature shows that foreign nationals in other contexts faced challenges like limited access to healthcare facilities and governments allowed them to access their COVID-19 alleviation services for free. For instance, King Salman of Saudi Arabia gave access to treatment for everyone suffering from COVID-19 including foreign nationals (Groupe URD, 2020). Similarly, in Portugal, foreign nationals were given full access to all services that permanent residents were entitled to during the COVID-19 lockdown (Meer & Villegas, 2020). In England, COVID-19 was added to Schedule 1 of the National Health Service Regulations on 29 January 2020, which resulted in free diagnosis and treatment of coronavirus to anyone including foreign nationals (Meer & Villegas, 2020). Meghan et al. (2021) noted that African countries like Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Uganda responded by including free or subsidized access to COVID-19 healthcare services for foreigners. However, in other settings, foreign nationals faced challenges in accessing health care services. For instance, in Libya, migrants did not have access to health care because of a lack of documentation, discrimination, and the country's growing insecurity (Groupe URD, 2020).

Existing literature show that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in economic challenges like loss of jobs and reduced income for foreign nationals. The severity of the impact on foreign nationals' jobs depended on the host nations' economic conditions and the sector they were employed (Groupe URD, 2020). In Italy, the COVID-19 lockdown resulted in severe economic crises characterised by loss of jobs, reductions in wages, or loss of income (Chowdhury & Chakraborty, 2021). This resulted in the Italian government transferring 400 million euros at the end of March 2020 to all local governments so that they could distribute food vouchers to affected families (Sanfelici, 2021). The municipalities had to develop the criteria for issuing the vouchers and the value. Most local governments issued vouchers to local citizens and foreigners with residence permits which excluded undocumented foreign nationals (Sanfelici, 2021). In this regard, undocumented and precariously employed foreign nationals were severely affected.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected remittances which are defined as the money from foreign nationals' earnings in the host countries that they send back to their families in their home countries (European Commission (EC), 2020). These remittances are very useful to foreign nationals' families in their home countries because they are used to pay for costs related to education, household utilities, healthcare, family credits, and starting small businesses (EC, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic impacted remittance inflows due to situations that foreigners faced in host

countries such as reduced salaries, job losses, and increased household and healthcare costs (Mutekwe 2022).

### **Strong and weak ties: Towards a theoretical/conceptual framework**

This paper used social network theory to understand how foreign nationals managed to cope with COVID-19-induced challenges in SA. Social networks are defined as “sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants in destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin” (Massey et al., 1994, p. 728). These networks consist of strong ties and weak ties. Strong ties exist among family members and friends while weak ties exist between colleagues and people from the same ethnic group (Granovetter, 1973). The network view looks at the web of relationships in which actors are part that can offer or constrain opportunities. Migrants use information from friends, colleagues, kinsmen, and family when traveling to other countries (Landau & Duponchel, 2011). These networks are important because friends and family furnish migrants with valuable resources such as money, accommodation, information on work and visas, and moral support (Hofmann, 2015).

Social networks can provide a variety of support such as emotional, informational, and instrumental or practical support (Ryan et al., 2008). Migrants can get support from a variety of people and through different relationships. For example, they can get emotional support from strong ties among partners, family members, and close friends (Friberg, 2012). Weak ties often provide informational support through colleagues, neighbors, and connections outside of one’s close associates (Friberg, 2012). In social network theory, “the actor is a subject in different networks which he or she uses rationally to maximise utility” (Elrick, 2005, p. 2). The social network theory suggests that kin and friendship ties reduce migration’s social and financial costs (Massey et al., 1993). Social networks also contribute to the initial stages of migrants’ integration (Caputo & Gidley, 2013).

Granovetter (1973) opines that weak ties are important compared to strong ties because they offer migrants opportunities and useful knowledge in coping with and overcoming challenges related to migrating to a new setting. More so, weak ties are important in that they connect migrants with the host society, enabling migrants to adapt and integrate easily into the host societies (Granovetter, 1973). A study on migrants’ social networks and their negotiation of the city of Johannesburg discovered that strong ties were more useful than weak ties (Jean, 2008). This paper focused on both weak and strong ties to ascertain how these social networks have enabled foreign nationals to cope with the COVID-19 challenges in SA. In this paper, strong ties include foreigner’s family members and friends while weak ties are foreign national’s colleagues, fellow foreign nationals, locals, and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

The literature reviewed in this section showed that foreigners faced several challenges during the pandemic and that in some contexts, government measures cushioned foreign migrants from COVID-19-related challenges, while in other countries the measures were exclusionary. It is within these instances where the measures were exclusionary that social networks played an important role in enabling foreign nationals to cope with COVID-19 shocks. The literature reviewed here does a good job of listing challenges faced by foreign nationals and the government relief measures given to foreigners while in cases where the government neglected foreign

nationals, it does not explain the coping mechanisms they employed. More so, the literature is silent on the role social networks played in helping migrants cope with COVID-19-induced challenges. Therefore, this study closed these gaps by focusing on challenges faced by foreign nationals in SA and the role social networks played in helping them to cope with these challenges.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper adopted a qualitative methodology to study the challenges and coping mechanisms of foreign nationals during the COVID-19 pandemic in SA. The paper employed phenomenology which 'is a technique for qualitative research that highlights the commonalities among those with comparable experiences' (Satsatin et al., 2023, p. 20). Since the lockdown rules of social distancing posed challenges to face-to-face methods of gathering data, the paper adopted online data collection methods. This study was conducted from March 2020 - March 2022. Participants were purposefully selected depending on whether they were a foreign national or a local South African member of a CSO that deals with foreign nationals. Interviewed participants were asked to refer the researcher to their family and friends who were suitable to participate in the study. Thus, 16 interviews were conducted and eight were done through Zoom, three through telephone calls, and five through WhatsApp audio calls. The interview medium was chosen depending on the participants' preference and access to a stable internet connection and information communication technology device. The interviews were all conducted in English and transcribed for analysis. The researcher transcribed some of the interviews especially those from key participants while some were transcribed with the help of a professional transcriber. The table below sums up the profiles of the participants interviewed.

<b>NAME</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>NATIONALITY and/or ORGANISATION</b>	<b>PROVINCE</b>
Melody	Female	SA Lawyers for Human Rights	Gauteng
Tafadzwa	Male	Cameroonian	Western Cape
Lucy	Female	SA Landless People's Movement	Western Cape
Moses	Male	Malawian	Gauteng
Tabani	Male	SA SA Makause Community Development Forum	Gauteng
Kudzai	Male	Zimbabwean	Gauteng
Palesa	Female	Mozambican	Gauteng
Thoko	Female	SA Global South Against Xenophobia	Western Cape
Marcia	Female	Zimbabweans in SA	Gauteng
Lloyd	Male	Zimbabwean	Western Cape
Rumbidzai	Female	SA Voice of Azania	Western Cape
Thabile	Female	Zimbabwean	Gauteng
Marlon	Male	Zimbabwean	Gauteng
Kagiso	Male	Mozambican	Gauteng
Monica	Female	Kenyan	Gauteng
Musa	Male	Cameroonian	Gauteng

The table above shows that of the 16 participants who were interviewed, five of them were South Africans who are community leaders, one Kenyan, five Zimbabweans, two Cameroonians, one Malawian, and two Mozambicans. Of the 16 participants, eight were females and eight were males while five of them were from the Western Cape and 13 were from the Gauteng provinces.

Data from interviews were supplemented with document analysis of various media publications and academic literature and by attending webinars where issues affecting foreign nationals during the pandemic were discussed. Thus, these various data collection methods helped to triangulate the data which increased the validity of the paper's findings as suggested by Carter et al. (2024). The documents that were analysed in this study were downloaded on Google search using keywords such as the COVID-19 pandemic and foreigners in SA, foreigners in SA and access to food, foreigners in SA, and healthcare services among others. These keywords yielded a variety of data sources that were analysed for themes in this paper.

In this study, analyzing, collecting and triangulation of data were not separate processes because interviews, webinars, and document analysis involved endless critical work that pointed to new questions and gaps that were explored through any of the three data collection methods. This was done in a way that as interviews unfolded, the researcher identified similarities and patterns in participants' storylines and coded them into different theme groups. Some themes would present gaps rather than answers, and the researcher would fill these gaps through document analysis and data from webinars. Additionally, webinars raised interesting issues that the researcher developed further by reviewing documents and literature. The data analysis process followed a thematic analysis procedure as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2011). The study got ethical clearance from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee. Participants were emailed information sheets before the interview, and they gave their consent verbally which was recorded during the interview. The identities of participants are concealed by using pseudonyms.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Health challenges faced by migrants: limited access to healthcare facilities in SA**

The findings of this paper show that foreign nationals faced challenges of limited access to healthcare services during the pandemic. Restricted access to healthcare facilities among foreign nationals manifested in the form of 'medical xenophobia' - a situation where African migrants are discriminated against in public healthcare facilities because of their nationality (Huisman, 2020). Tafadzwa, a community organizer from the Western Cape, narrated an incident when a Cameroonian who had COVID-19 symptoms struggled to get ambulance services. This was because of his accent; the ambulance services could tell that he was not a South African and chose not to come and help him. To get around this challenge, a local South African called the ambulance and it came which shows the denial of healthcare services to foreign nationals during the pandemic. This also shows how weak ties helped foreign nationals to get around 'medical xenophobia' through the help of locals.

The findings of this paper show that foreign nationals' limited access to healthcare during COVID-19 was evident at the onset of the pandemic through a COVID-19 test form that required a South African ID number, which was exclusionary for foreign

nationals. Dr. Eric Goemaere of Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), noted that the COVID-19 testing form asked for an ID number which excluded those without an ID, yet everybody needed to have access to tests if they were symptomatic (Huisman, 2020). Similarly, Melody, who is a member of the Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) explained that they lobbied against the need for an ID on the test form because it was exclusionary. This shows how social networks (weak ties) in the form of CSOs like MSF and LHR assisted in making sure that migrants accessed healthcare during the pandemic.

This paper's findings show that foreign nationals faced challenges associated with the practicalities of self-isolating especially those who contracted COVID-19. Kudzai explained that when he was infected with COVID-19, he had to move out of his home to protect his wife and two children. Kudzai stayed with his friend who had also tested positive for COVID-19. Similarly, Palesa explained that when her mother tested positive for COVID-19, she was fortunate, that their house had enough rooms that allowed her to self-isolate at home. The quotation below best captures how they navigated her self-isolation.

*We stay in a three-bedroom, so she had her room where she was able to self-isolate. We use the same toilet, so I would go in and sanitize it all the time. I was the one giving her food and going to buy medication, so we had a proper arrangement for isolation compared to many other people (Palesa, interview, 2021).*

The narratives above highlight how migrants used social networks like friends and family members to manage the challenges of isolation and care. The practicalities of self-isolation explained here refute the experiences of self-isolation for foreign nationals in other parts of the world such as Greece (Amnesty International, 2020), Lebanon, and Uganda (Solidar, 2020). Their conditions were inhumane, overcrowded, and associated with limited or no access to healthcare, which made it difficult to practice basic hygiene and self-isolate (Sanfelici, 2021). This difference between the experiences of foreign nationals in SA and elsewhere can be attributed to the fact that most foreign nationals in the countries listed above were refugees in camps while participants of this study were not. This paper's results show that foreign nationals access to healthcare was worsened by limited access to information and language barriers. The secretary-general of the Somali Community Board of SA, Abdirizak Ali Osman, shared the following regarding the challenge of the language barrier among foreign nationals and access to healthcare services.

In most cases, foreigners and locals do not understand each other's languages, making communication challenging. In healthcare facilities where Indigenous South African languages are spoken, a migrant may find it challenging to communicate with healthcare workers, and this often leads to communication breakdowns that can affect the quality of healthcare received by foreign nationals. I think it is high time that the health department considers employing health workers who can speak foreign languages (Mehlwana, 2021).

This shows that the challenge of access to information was worsened by language barriers for most foreign nationals. However, CSOs like the LHR and African Diaspora Forum attempted to bridge this gap through the Right to Know campaign where they

developed pamphlets translated into numerous languages. Melody was proud that they had done a crucial job that the government failed to do. This finding resonates with what Solidar (2020) who observed that in the UK COVID-19 safety measures messages were not translated into languages understood by non-nationals which resulted in CSOs like Volunteering Matters translating the national safety guidelines into 20 languages for all non-English speaking UK residents. In this way, weak ties were instrumental in ensuring that foreign nationals had access to information on COVID-19. The limitations of accessing healthcare explained here do not resonate with the experiences of foreign nationals in nations such as Portugal, Saudi Arabia, England, Djibouti, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda who were given free or subsidised access to healthcare during the lockdown (Meer & Villegas, 2020; Groupe URD, 2020; Meghan et al., 2021). However, these experiences align with what foreign nationals in Libya experienced limited access to healthcare services (Groupe URD, 2020).

### ***Foreign nationals and challenges in accessing the vaccine***

The findings of this paper show that foreign nationals especially the undocumented ones faced challenges in accessing the COVID-19 vaccine and that CSOs were instrumental in lobbying for access for all. The vaccine rollout strategy in SA expected all people who intended to get vaccinated to register on the National Electronic Vaccination Data System (EVDS). The EVDS created a national COVID-19 vaccination register that assisted with the procurement, timing, and vaccine rollout (Walker et al., 2021). The EVDS required an ID, passport, or permit number and it did not have an option to register anyone without any form of identification (Walker et al., 2021). In this way, the EVDS became a barrier for undocumented foreign nationals to be vaccinated. This need for documents resonates with Bojorquez-Chapela et al. (2023) analysis of Latin American country's national vaccine programs which despite the inclusion of foreign nationals, administrative challenges to the vaccination of undocumented foreign nationals were detected in the form of the need for documents. A good example of this was in Chile where an ID was a requirement to register for vaccination and this excluded foreigners who did not have any ID (Bojorquez-Chapela et al., 2023). The challenges of including foreign nationals may be best explained by the observation of the IOM (2022) that most countries' policies intended to include foreign nationals yet the practicality of it presented challenges that policymakers did not foresee for some categories of foreign nationals. In this case, the practicalities of vaccinating undocumented foreign nationals seem to not have been considered by many countries.

The contradictory messages from the government at the initial stages of the vaccine rollout on whether undocumented foreign nationals would be vaccinated were a major challenge faced by foreign nationals in SA. For instance, on 30 January 2021, Dr Zweli Mkhize the then minister of health noted that the government had no vaccine plan for undocumented foreigners. On 1 February 2021, in a national address, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that foreign nationals were to be included in the vaccine rollout. Again, at the end of February 2021, Dr. Mkhize told members of the National Council of Provinces that the government must draw up plans for the vaccination of undocumented foreign nationals. The IOM (2022) noted that some countries avoided publicizing their intentions to include foreign nationals in their vaccination campaigns



for various reasons such as avoiding xenophobic reactions. This might be the reason for the contradictory messages explained here which might have been uttered based on how each official wanted to manage xenophobic reactions, especially in a country like SA where foreign nationals have suffered xenophobic attacks before.

This uncertainty regarding undocumented migrants' vaccination plans resulted in CSOs intervening in addressing this challenge by lobbying for vaccines for all. For instance, on 23 February 2021, LHR, Global South against Xenophobia (GSAX), and the South African Human Rights Defenders Network jointly called on the government to explain how undocumented foreigners were going to be vaccinated (C19 People's, 2021). Tabani a member of the Makause Community Development Forum explained that as an organisation, they were advocating for everyone to be vaccinated irrespective of nationality unless one chose not to. These combined efforts of CSOs resulted in undocumented foreign nationals being vaccinated. For instance, the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health (DoH) teamed up with the Denis Hurley Centre in Durban to vaccinate undocumented foreign nationals using a person's name and date of birth (Matlhare, 2021). In addition, the Gauteng DoH in partnership with the University of Pretoria, the Johannesburg District Office, Anova, MSF, and Wits Research Health Institute opened pop-up vaccination sites in Johannesburg (Africa News, 2021).

Bojorquez-Chapela et al. (2023) state that the COVID-19 pandemic was a test for the policies of inclusion and health care for foreigners in most countries. Thus, the failure to include foreign nationals in the vaccine rollout strategy timeously shows the loopholes in SA's policies of inclusion especially when looking at foreign nationals. These failures are the foundation upon which social networks in particular weak ties in the form of CSOs lobbied for foreign nationals to access. More so, the failure to explicitly include foreign nationals in the vaccine rollout strategy was not only present in SA but in most Latin American countries like Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru (Bojorquez-Chapela et al., 2023).

### ***Limited access to government hunger alleviation services***

The findings of this paper show that hunger is one of the challenges foreigners faced during the COVID-19 lockdown in SA. The South African government's hunger alleviation programs included the provision of food hampers to affected families including foreign nationals. A South African national ID or a special permit was a prerequisite to receiving food hampers that undocumented foreign nationals did not have which resulted in them failing to get food parcels (New York Post, 2020). This corroborates the experiences of foreigners in other contexts like Italy where food was distributed to Italians and permits holders which excluded undocumented foreign nationals (Sanfelici, 2021). However, in SA, the situation seemed to have been worse since some participants like Lloyd felt that whether one was documented or not did not matter because foreign nationals were not included in the government food hampers. Melody explained that the LHR received a lot of hunger complaints from foreign nationals. She added that they had to locate community leaders of the communities where the affected foreigners resided to intervene, and they would help the affected families. Thoko, a member of the GSAX, explained that their organisation also received calls about hunger and starvation among foreign nationals. The quotation below captures her experiences.

*“Even though we did not have money, we did fundraising, we also checked where the Department of Social Development (DSD), NGOs, or charity organisations were providing food, and we put people in touch with them. We did this for non-locals like women in rural areas, and we got calls of people having fainted in the streets. What troubled me was that the government was not making available the information that its resources were open to non-locals. So we developed good relationships with the DSD, particularly here in the Western Cape. The head of the DSD is a fantastic individual, he has been very responsive, and everybody who has been referred to him has ensured that they have been checked up on et cetera. I cannot say the same for other Departments” (Thoko, interview, 2020).*

Marcia a leader of an organization called Zimbabweans in SA explained that as an organisation they had to source food for affected families, and the C19 People’s Coalition was one of the most helpful organisations. The C19 People’s Coalition helped them with food items like vegetables, mealie meals, and soups among others. Marcia noted that community leaders were xenophobic towards foreigners when it came to issuing food hampers because they required a South African ID to register people. Marcia lamented that when she sourced food for foreigners, community leaders who had discriminated against foreigners from accessing government food hampers were again fighting to get that food. Tabani explained that his community’s hunger alleviation initiatives included foreign nationals, and the quotation below best captures his community’s position on migrants.

*“When you touch on the issue of the migrants whom no one assisted, and they were excluded in many of those government schemes. So that was the position that the organization played to make sure that we covered especially those that were excluded. As an organisation, we are anti-xenophobic in whatever we do; there is no discrimination, and we are accommodating everyone” (Tabani, interview, 2021).*

Tabani explained that they stay in an informal settlement such that they know each other hence; it was easy to locate beneficiaries for food hampers. He elaborated that they established volunteers who identified beneficiaries in all three sections of their informal settlement. They categorised beneficiaries to be prioritised as the elderly, the sick, pregnant, and single women raising kids on their own. He explained that if a foreign national fell into any group that would be benefiting, they would help that person. This highlights that social networks in the form of CSOs were useful in ameliorating the challenge of hunger during the pandemic. Furthermore, Marlon, a Zimbabwean student who researched the impact of COVID-19 on self-employed foreigners in Johannesburg explained that from the ten people he interviewed; only one person received a food voucher. Some of his participants did not bother to apply for food hampers because they felt that the government was not going to cater to them based on their previous bad experiences when accessing government benefits. Some of Marlon’s participants got food parcels from their employers while a car guard told him that when the lockdown started, his regular clients contributed money and bought groceries for him.

This paper's results also show how the pandemic resulted in forged unity and networks among nationalities. For example, Zimbabweans managed to unite and mobilize resources using social media groups like 'Zimbabweans in Cape Town' and helped each other to buy food and pay rent (Jacobsen & Simpson, 2020). Similarly, a quotation below from Musa on the initiatives they did as foreign nationals to help other Cameroonians shows how unity was forged around nationalities.

*“So what we did was that monthly those of us who were fortunate to have a salary identified those who needed some necessities like groceries, and we split up among ourselves. We did this for about six months in 2020. Then as soon as the economy opened a bit, we stopped, but we were able to support some of our brothers and sisters for a while” (Musa, interview, 2021).*

The findings of this paper show that foreign nationals who were suffering from hunger got help from churches. This idea of churches stepping in to help during COVID-19 blends well with Ngcobo and Mashau, (2022, p. 4) who noted that 'the church in every locality must make efforts to serve as a change agency'. Thus, churches served well in as much as this call is located by making means to help those affected. For instance, Tafadzwa explained that he contacted Catholic churches in Cape Town and Woodstock which he is a member, and they assisted by giving them food weekly. Tafadzwa also got help from his networks as captured below.

*“I also have Muslim friends who got me some food which was for 30 people. Then there was this international migrant organisation, which also tried to organize, seeing the difficulties that foreign nationals were suffering. They had to mobilize and get a voucher for R700 for migrant families to go to the shop and get some food. There were soup kitchens where some migrants could go and get food” (Tafadzwa, interview, 2020).*

Furthermore, just like churches in Cape Town, churches in Johannesburg also helped foreign nationals during the pandemic. Thabile a student from Zimbabwe explained that when the lockdown started in 2020 her church in Melville Johannesburg gave students food parcels up until November 2020. Similarly, Monica a student from Kenya also got support from her church which had migrant support programs where she was given money to buy food. This finding corroborates what the Parkridge Church in Florida USA did, where it partnered with Christian organisations to help people affected by COVID-19 (Bevill, 2021). The accounts given here show that migrants faced challenges in accessing government food hampers and both strong and weak ties were instrumental in coping with food insecurity since some got help from employers and church members.

## **SOCIOECONOMIC CHALLENGES**

### ***Loss of employment and reduced income***

This paper's findings show that loss of employment and reduced income are some of the challenges faced by foreign nationals in SA. These challenges were worsened by the barriers they faced in accessing government relief measures. The government introduced several measures to cushion people from the socio-economic impacts of the lockdown measures. These measures included the COVID-19 SRDG of R350, 350

million Business Relief Fund (BRF), increased child and social support grants, tax subsidies for individuals and small businesses, and reduced UIF payments (Mukumbang et al., 2020). Findings show that while local South Africans accessed their UIF, foreign nationals struggled to get theirs, yet they were formally employed and paid UIF contributions before the pandemic (Mutewe, 2022; Jobson et al., 2021). Foreign nations were not paid their UIF because the UIF system did not accept passport numbers (Business Insider SA, 2020). More so, the SRDG grant was available to local citizens, holders of permanent residency, and those with refugee status. When applying for the grant a South African ID number was needed. For those who had refugee status and had not received their refugee ID, the South African Social Security Agency had to generate a temporary unique 13-digit ID for them (Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town, 2020). These relief measures excluded undocumented foreign nationals who did not have an ID, asylum, or special permits. Therefore, foreign nationals who lost their employment or had reduced income due to COVID-19 could not access the abovementioned relief measures because of the exclusionary bureaucratic requirements.

The paper's findings show that it was against the backdrop of the above-mentioned challenges in accessing government relief measures that foreign nationals' social networks became their means of survival. Marlon shared a story of a Zimbabwean car guard who earned nearly R2000 a month before the lockdown, who lost his source of income during the COVID-19 lockdown, and asked his church member to employ him as a gardener. He added that this church member gave him the job as a gardener for a month, and then employed him as a loader in his warehouse since he runs a medium-sized company. This shows that unlike Micro Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Indonesia which experienced several obstacles with some failing to continue business operations (Hanifan & Dhewanto, 2022; Cornelis & Febriansyah, 2023), some in SA managed to survive and helped people who had lost their sources of income. The loss of jobs and income of foreign nationals can be best explained by the fact that they work in precarious low-wage sectors where they are usually the first ones to lose their jobs in times of crisis (Jones et al., 2021). Moses is one of the foreign nationals who lost their jobs because of the COVID-19 pandemic. He explained that after losing his job in October 2020, he relocated from Cape Town to Johannesburg to stay in his parents' house. While Moses lost his job, he explained that he used some of his retrenchment package to help his cousin who had also lost her job. The quotation below captures how Moses helped her cousin's sister.

*“I have a cousin who worked as a maid, so she could not work when this thing happened. I had to give her money like R1500 for 3 months to help her sustain herself because she has a kid in high school. It was hard taking out money when I was not earning much money compared to what I used to earn, and my wife was not working” (Moses, interview, 2020).*

Moses' account shows the role played by strong ties in helping foreign nationals cope with COVID-19 challenges. This is deduced in two ways; first by him getting help from his parents who allowed him to stay in their house and secondly by him helping a cousin. Palesas' account is like Moses' narrative because when her mother lost her job their family in Mozambique assisted them. Palesa noted that, even though

they had lost their mother's source of income they still found ways to help her aunty who worked as a domestic worker and was affected by the lockdown. Moses' and Palesa's accounts are interesting because they show that foreign nationals who were affected by the pandemic still had to find ways to help their relatives who were worse off than them. Similarly, Marlon narrated that when he had financial challenges during the lockdown his siblings assisted him. Monica also faced financial challenges when she lost her job during COVID-19 but was fortunate enough that her Ph.D. supervisor gave her a research job. This shows the utility of Monica's weak ties in her Ph.D. supervisor giving her a job. These accounts reflect that informal work and temporary labour contracts do not provide foreign nationals with financial stability, and the capacity to save money to cushion any income interruptions (Jones et al., 2021).

### ***The impact of the lockdown on remittances***

The results of this paper show that the lockdown had negative effects on remittances. This was so because the loss of employment reduced the amount of money foreign nationals could send back home. More so, the closure of borders meant that foreigners could not send groceries and other items across borders. To this end, the StatsSA 2020 report shows that only 18% of foreign nationals could send remittances during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, foreign nationals who could afford to remit during the lockdown could not remit the same amounts they did before the lockdown. More so, some foreign nationals in SA had to receive remittances from their families back home or in other countries. This is deduced from Lloyd who pointed out that foreign nationals struggled to collect monies sent by their relatives from abroad because their documents had expired. This shows that foreign nationals received help from their social networks during the lockdown. Musa explained that most foreign nationals in SA were unable to remit as they used to do before COVID-19. Similarly, Marlon learned that most foreign nationals who are employed informally were unable to remit. Some participants reported that they told their families back home that they were unable to help them while some advised their families to move from the city to the rural areas where the cost of living is cheaper. These accounts show that foreign nationals in SA usually use their earnings to look after their families in their countries of origin and the COVID-19 pandemic affected their ability to continue doing so. The decline in remittances noted here resonates with the general worldwide trend where the pandemic resulted in reduced remittances as noted by the World Bank (2020) cited in Jones et al. (2021) that the overall remittance flows declined in April and May 2020 and partially recovered in June 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic altered the usual trend where foreign nationals send remittances to their families in their home countries as some of them had to receive money from their families in their home countries. Palesa stated that her mother lost her source of income and their family in Mozambique had to send them money. The issue of foreign nationals receiving remittances was also evident in a story shared by Kagiso about his neighbour from Malawi who lost his job because of COVID-19, and he wanted to go back home. He explained that the person had to ask his uncle from the United Kingdom who helped him with a hundred and forty-five Euros to use to go back to Malawi. This money had to be sent in Kagiso's name since the person was undocumented. These narratives from Palesa and Kagiso show that migrants received

remittances from social networks, and they had to get help from their social networks with documents to access their money. The decision to go back home after losing jobs resonates with the findings of Jones et al. (2021) who noted that many of the migrants they surveyed returned home and gave up their jobs due to COVID-19-related concerns. This underscores the precarious nature of informal sector employment where most foreign nationals are employed without access to healthcare coverage, workplace rights, and social protection (Jones et al., 2021).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper has demonstrated the challenges faced by foreign nationals and how their social networks enabled them to cope with COVID-19-induced challenges. The paper has divided the findings into two broad themes namely health, and socio-economic challenges, each with its sub-themes. A trend seems to have evolved in each of the sub-themes on the utility of strong and weak ties. For instance, in the sub-theme on access to health care services migrants have used strong ties while weak ties were instrumental in coping with hunger and starvation. Loss of employment and income is the only sub-theme where migrants have made use of both strong and weak ties, while the sub-theme on remittances shows the utility of strong ties. Granovetter (1973) argues that weak ties are more important than strong ties because they offer migrants opportunities and useful knowledge to cope with challenges in their host countries and they connect them with the host society, enabling them to adapt and integrate easily. However, contrary to Granovetter's view this paper has found both strong and weak ties to have been useful in making sure that foreign nationals cope with COVID-19 challenges in SA.

The challenges that participants in this paper faced in accessing government services show the need for the government to ensure that in the future everyone irrespective of their nationality and legal status in the country can access public services, especially during state emergencies. This can be done by eradicating bureaucratic and administrative barriers such as the need for ID numbers. Given the role that CSOs played in helping foreign nationals as highlighted in this paper, the government should seek to work with CSOs when it comes to ensuring that foreign nationals access government services. This paper's findings on 'medical xenophobia' and discrimination underscore the need to capacitate civil servants on policy changes and to hold them accountable for unconstitutional acts and human rights violations.

Findings of this paper have revealed the resilience and adaptability of foreign nationals in mitigating the COVID-19 crisis while highlighting the vulnerabilities that persisted among foreign nationals before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and in the post-pandemic period. The findings of this paper provide valuable insights for policymakers, humanitarian organizations, and stakeholders working toward inclusive recovery strategies. This paper's findings underscore the need for a holistic approach to addressing inequalities that have been magnified by the pandemic, ensuring that foreign nationals are not left behind in government policies. The findings of this paper contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between migration, inequality, and public health crises, offering practical recommendations for building a more equitable society. By addressing these ongoing issues, this paper provides actionable insights for addressing inequalities and vulnerabilities that have been exacerbated or

newly revealed by the COVID-19 crisis. This paper's findings highlight the necessity of forward-looking policies that address both immediate recovery needs and systemic inequities to foster sustainable development in a post-pandemic world.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper had methodological limitations associated with participants' lack of or limited access to broadband internet and information communication technology devices. This was a major challenge given that the study was conducted at the peak of the pandemic when lockdown rules prohibited face-to-face interviews such that online and telephonic interviews became the only available options. In addition, unlike Zoom, WhatsApp and telephone calls do not currently offer the ability to record sessions securely. Instead, they require the use of third-party providers. As such, the researcher had to use his mobile phone to record and store sessions. The other limitation of online and telephonic interviews was the difficulty of connecting with the participants, owing to the lack of face-to-face communication. These limitations combined made it impossible for the researcher to understand participants' moods and to capture non-verbal cues. More so, this might have affected the quality of the data collected. However, the triangulation of data sources might have mediated the combined effects of the abovementioned challenges with online and telephonic data collection methods used in this study.

Given that this study was conducted at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic when the researcher was forced to abandon face-to-face interviews, there is a need for future studies to be conducted face-to-face to make up for the limitations noted here. More so, future studies can also take stock of whether foreign nationals have managed to recover from the pandemic-related shocks mentioned in this paper. Such studies can also look at the current relationships between migrants and the various social networks they used during the COVID-19 era. Lastly, since this paper only focused on foreign nationals, future studies can be done on local South Africans to draw comparisons between the challenges and coping mechanisms they employed during the pandemic and those of migrants listed in this paper.

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**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

**Ethical Standards**

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.