

■ OPINION / COLUMNISTS

*Neva
Makgetla*

NEVA MAKGETLA: Government hurtling towards the farce of ignoring history again

🔒 BL PREMIUM

14 JUNE 2021 - 16:15



Mounted police during beach closures

on December 16 2020 in Durban.

Picture: GALLO IMAGES/DARREN

STEWART

In the early 2000s, SA's graveyards had rows of new graves. From 2005 to 2008, 600,000 people died a year, almost twice as many as a decade earlier. Then the number began to fall, dropping below 450,000 by 2019. The reason? SA finally followed the science on HIV and rolled out antiretrovirals on a mass scale.

ADVERTISEMENT

The HIV pandemic should have taught policymakers that pandemics don't go away if you ignore them. They just get worse. Yet now, as a third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic threatens, the

government is again walking away from scientific advice, avoiding the restrictions on social gatherings and alcohol sales needed to curb the pandemic.

The trends in Covid-19 contagion are scary by any measure. Daily new cases shot up from under 1,000 in early April to well over 6,000 last week. In the same period, the share of tests coming back positive has risen from below 5% to over 15%. No wonder a panicky note is seeping into communications by epidemiologists, health-care workers and medical schemes.

We've learnt a lot from earlier Covid-19 surges. It's not necessary to shut down most economic activities. Most workplaces can stay open. But in the affected provinces, social gatherings, whether private or in businesses like restaurants, have to stop. If SA strictly limits high-risk activities, we can protect both lives

and livelihoods across the rest of the economy. In effect, when Covid-19 infections accelerate, society must sacrifice most entertainment services and alcohol sales to preserve prosperity in other industries.

ADVERTISEMENT

Over the past year, international research, including by the IMF and World Bank, has demonstrated repeatedly that decisive, early restrictions on social gatherings more than pay off in economic as well as health terms. Seeking to save entertainment venues and normalise social life

amid the pandemic just leads to repeated surges, at a huge cost for other businesses. Demand plummets as consumers stay home to avoid infection; absenteeism soars as exposed or infected workers go into quarantine or self-isolation; and measures to reduce contagion derail normal work practices.

Vaccines will not save us in the near future. At best, SA will be able to procure the doses needed to control Covid-19 in about six months.

ADVERTISEMENT

The state's reluctance to act largely reflects the difficulties of democracy in such a highly unequal

country. Liquor and entertainment businesses can afford continual legal challenges, massive media campaigns and intensive lobbying. By comparison, ordinary citizens – who as the contagion surges get sick, lose loved ones or see their livelihoods disappear – have far less say. The ballot box promises everyone an equal voice, but economic power puts a thumb on the scale.

Inequalities also isolate business and political leaders from most people's realities. Dense townships and informal settlements see much higher rates of infection than the leafy suburbs and remote farms. On the economic front, the number of formal managers and professionals is back to pre-pandemic levels. Lower-level jobs are still down 10%.

No wonder policymakers don't see much urgency around measures to

protect people from the third wave and its economic fallout. The government cut off most relief measures in March, with Covid-19 still uncontrolled and the economy unrecovered. That decision in itself makes it harder to restrict any livelihoods, even where the benefits to the broader economy far outweigh the costs.

Karl Marx said history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. The failure to follow the science on Covid-19, however, is as tragic as it was with HIV. Leadership in a democracy cannot mean simply giving in to whoever shouts loudest. It must combine accountability to voters with a commitment to standing up for sustainable solutions, rather than falling for lobbying and magical thinking.

• *Makgetla is a senior researcher with Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies.*

BusinessLIVE

Comment

Policy

We welcome comments that are civil and considered.

Any comments that are racist, bigoted or vulgar are not allowed.

Please read our Comment Policy before commenting.



Comments

Community



♥ Recommend 1

🐦 Tweet

f Share

Sort by Best ▾

[Join the discussion...](#)



Janice Hellyer

• 6 days ago

Why can't the public be responsible and look after themselves? They know what is good for them and what is not why should a government have to put in place rules in