

# South Africans endorse self-reliant development but question free trade and loan conditionalities

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 519 | Asafika Mpako and Mikhail Moosa**

## Summary

On the international stage, South Africa is often viewed as the gateway to Africa (Economist, 2012). The country is a relatively stable democracy with a sophisticated financial services industry that attracts global investment, making it an economic powerhouse in the region and on the continent (IOL, 2019).

South Africa's largest trading partners are China, the United States, and Germany (International Trade Centre, 2020). China's growing investment in Africa has prioritised other parts of the continent, but South Africa has strengthened its diplomatic ties with China and other global powers through the BRICS alliance (Trade Law Centre, 2022). The United States considers South Africa a strategic partner (U.S. Department of State, 2022), while the Soviet Union's historical support of the armed struggle against apartheid has cemented a strong allegiance within South Africa's ruling African National Congress party, though it has proven controversial since Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Lynd, 2022).

On a regional level, South Africa is the major economy in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and is often involved in mediation efforts to resolve political disputes in neighbouring countries (Hofmeyr, Moosa, Patel, & Murithi, 2022). South Africa's trading relationships within Africa have improved recently, but intra-Africa trade remains limited (Trade Law Centre, 2021).

How do South Africans view the international community and its role in their country's development? Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show considerable resistance among South Africans to free movement and trade, reflecting a preference for protecting domestic industries from foreign competition.

The United States ranks first, and China second, as South Africans' preferred development model, and citizens hold generally positive views of both countries' political and economic influence in South Africa, although a majority believe that the government has borrowed too heavily from China. South Africans clearly value self-reliance, supporting self-funded development over external loans and rejecting loan conditionalities, which have been the subject of widespread controversy (Stubbs, Reinsberg, Kentikelenis, & King, 2020).

These findings are relevant in the context of significant financing needs in South Africa, especially considering the severe economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and recent catastrophic flooding in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8

surveys in 2019/2021 cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 1,600 adult South Africans in May-June 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2018.

## Key findings

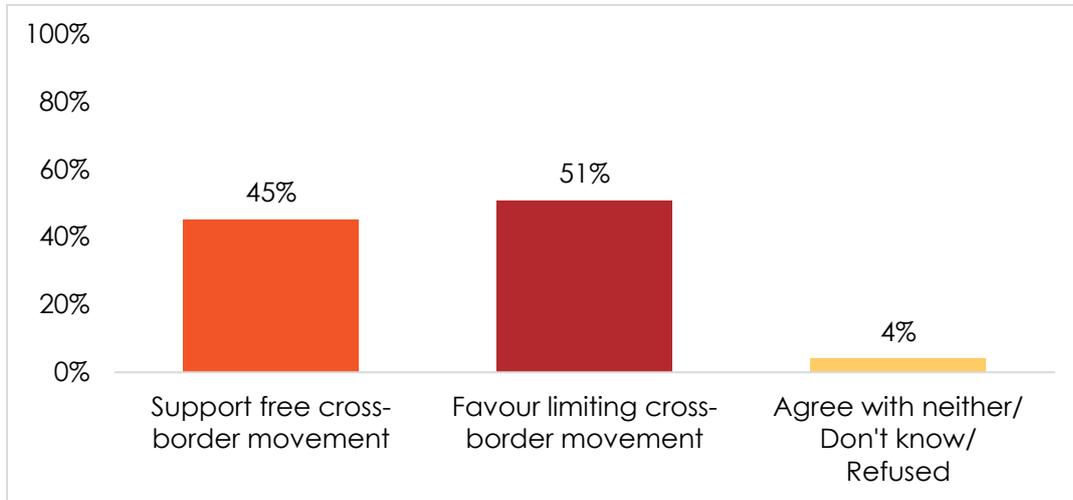
- Fewer than half (45%) of South Africans say people in the region should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade and work in other countries.
  - Opposition to free cross-border movement increases with respondents' education level, reaching 56% among those with post-secondary qualifications.
  - In practice, more than four in 10 citizens (44%) say crossing international borders in Southern Africa is difficult. Only 35% say it is easy.
- Almost half (47%) of respondents endorse restricting retail trade to South African citizens and businesses only. Only 43% favour allowing foreign-owned retail shops.
  - A majority (55%) of citizens favour protecting local producers from foreign competitors, while only 37% prefer free international trade.
- More than six in 10 South Africans (62%) say the country should fund its development from its own resources instead of relying on foreign loans.
  - More than half (51%) of citizens reject conditionalities attached to foreign loans restricting how the funds can be spent or requiring the South African government to promote democracy and human rights.
- The United States is the most popular development model in South Africa (cited by 37% of respondents), followed by China (20%).
  - South Africans see the economic and political influence of the United States, China, and other external powers as largely positive.
- A majority of respondents believe that China's economic activities have "a lot" (42%) or "some" (13%) influence on South Africa's economy.
  - Among those who are aware that China gives loans or development assistance to South Africa, more than two-thirds (68%) say their government has borrowed too heavily from China.

## An open or closed economy?

Southern Africa has a long history of regional migration and trade (Crush, Dodson, Williams, & Tevera, 2017). However, in South Africa, fewer than half (45%) of citizens say that people living in the region should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries. A slim majority (51%) instead say that to protect its citizens, the government should restrict the cross-border movement of people and goods (Figure 1).

Opposition to free cross-border movement is higher in cities (54%) than in rural areas (44%) and increases with respondents' education level, ranging from just 36% among those with no formal schooling to 56% among those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 2). Older respondents support restrictions more than younger respondents, with the exception of those older than 65.

**Figure 1: Views on cross-border movement | South Africa | 2021**



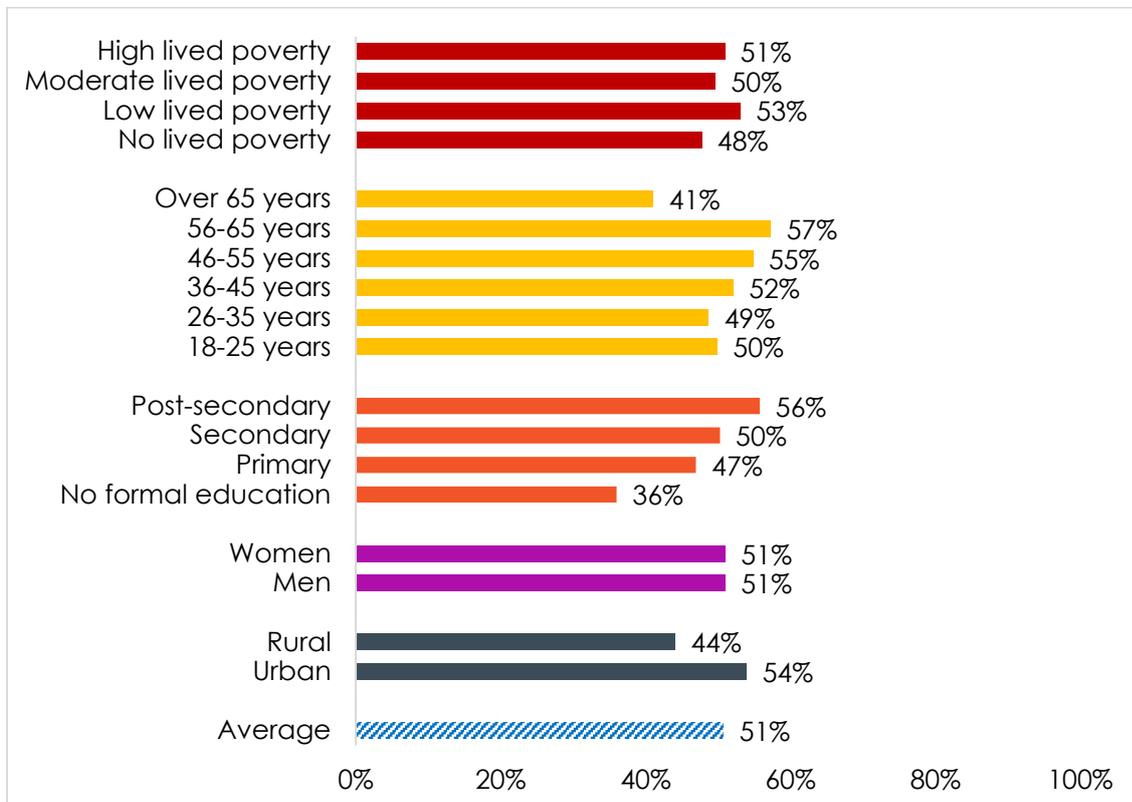
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: People living in Southern Africa should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries.

Statement 2: In order to protect their own citizens, governments should limit the cross-border movement of people and goods.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

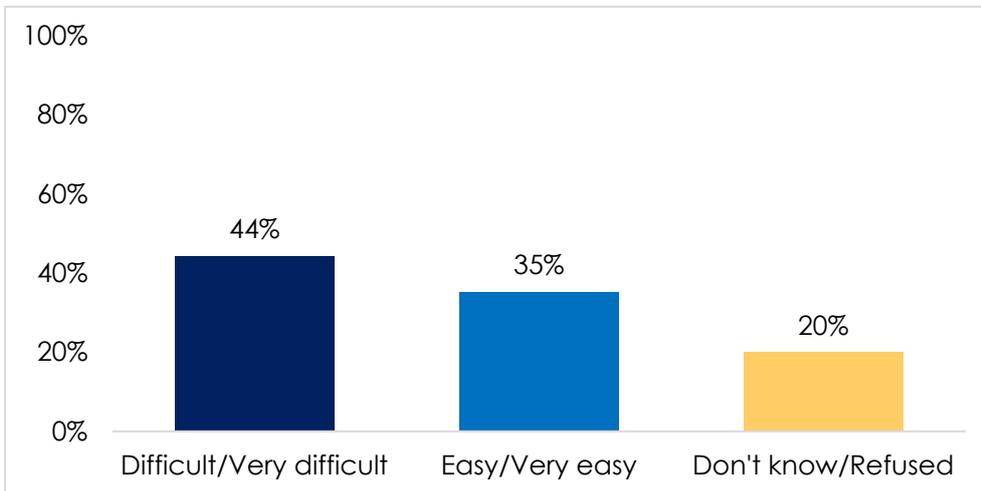
**Figure 2: Support for limiting cross-border movement | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021**



(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that governments should limit the cross-border movement of people and goods)

In practice, a plurality (44%) say that it is “difficult” or “very difficult” for people in the region to move across borders. More than one-third (35%) describe it as “easy” or “very easy,” while 20% say they’ve never tried or don’t know (Figure 3).

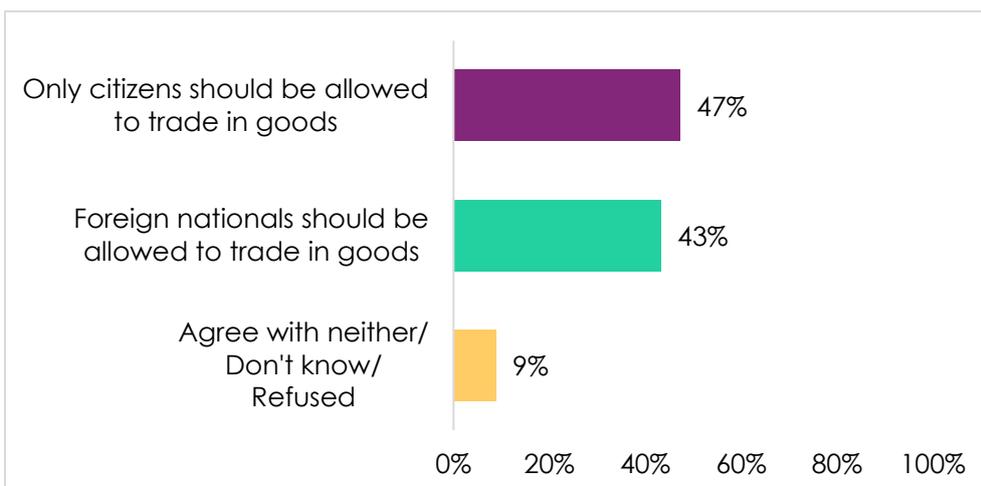
**Figure 3: Ease of crossing borders | South Africa | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, how easy or difficult is it for people in Southern Africa to cross international borders in order to work or trade in other countries, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

When asked whether their government should allow only citizens and companies of their own country to trade in consumer goods or should continue to permit foreigners and foreign corporations to set up shop in the country, South Africans are almost evenly divided. While 43% say foreign traders should be allowed in order to ensure a wider selection of low-cost products, 47% would limit trade in consumer goods to South African citizens, even if it means fewer goods on the market or higher prices (Figure 4).

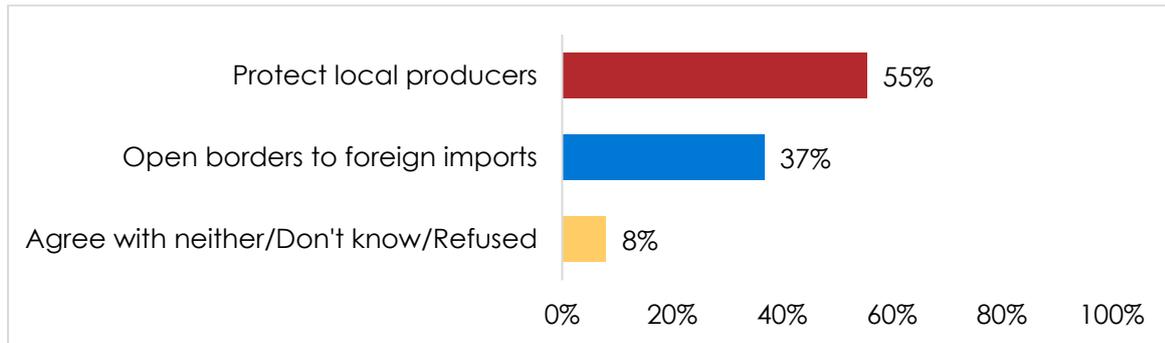
**Figure 4: Allow foreign traders vs. only national traders | South Africa | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** *Which of the following statements is closest to your view?*  
 Statement 1: *The government should only allow citizens and companies of our own country to trade in consumer goods, even if this means we will have fewer goods or higher prices.*  
 Statement 2: *The government should continue to permit foreigners and foreign corporations to set up retail shops in this country to ensure we have a wide choice of low-cost consumer goods.*  
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

More broadly, a majority of South Africans favour protectionism over free trade: 55% say the country should rely on local production and protect local producers from foreign competition, while just 37% say the country needs international trade to develop and should open its borders to foreign imports (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Reliance on international trade or local production?** | South Africa | 2021

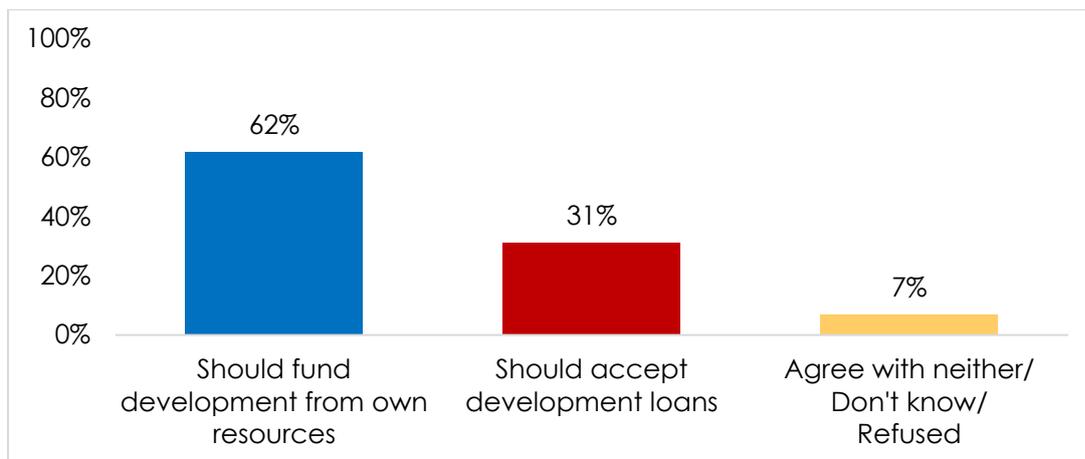


**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: In order to develop, our country must rely on trade with the rest of the world, including by opening our borders to foreign imports.  
 Statement 2: In order to develop, our country must rely on local production and protect local producers from foreign competition.  
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

**Attitudes toward development finance**

About three in five South Africans (62%) want their country to finance its national development using its own resources, even if it means paying more taxes. Support for using external development assistance is low, with only 31% endorsing external loans, highlighting South Africans’ preference to be self-reliant with the ability to control their own economic and political matters (Figure 6).

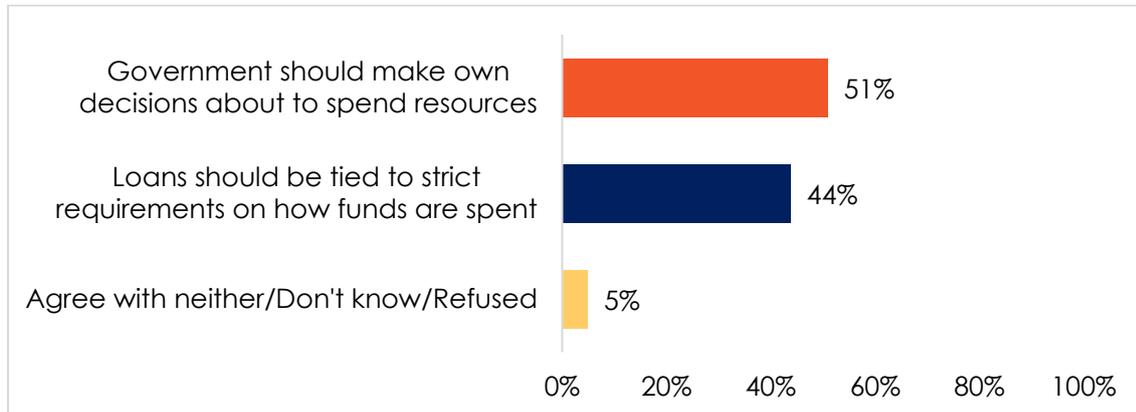
**Figure 6: Development through national resources or international loans?** | South Africa | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: It is important that as an independent nation, we finance development from our own resources, even if it means paying more taxes.  
 Statement 2: We should use external loans for the development of the country, even if it increases our indebtedness to foreign countries and institutions.  
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

If the country does accept loans from external sources, a slim majority (51%) of citizens say foreign donors or lenders should allow South Africa's government to make its own decisions about how to use the resources. But a significant minority (44%) prefer strict requirements for how the resources may be used (Figure 7).

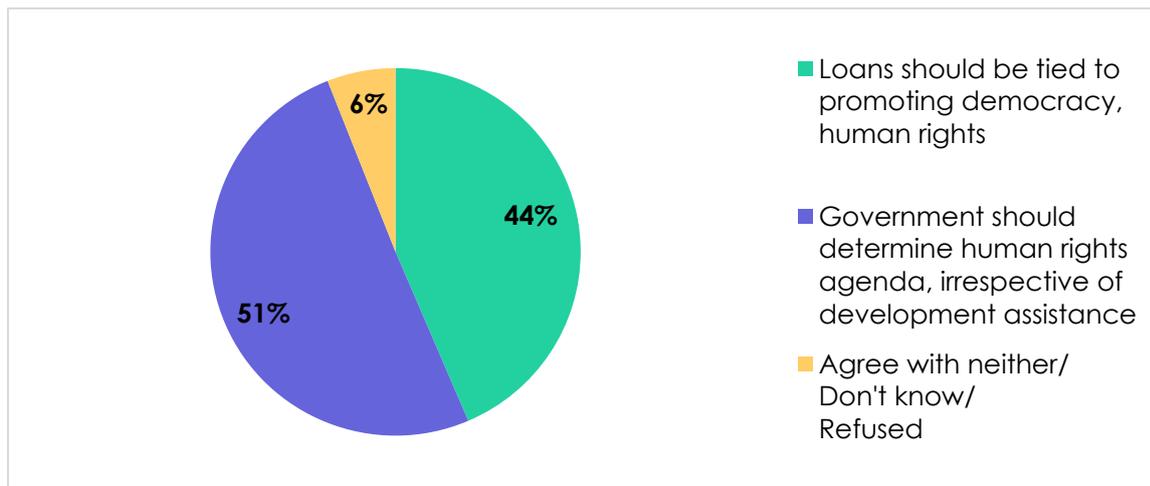
**Figure 7: Loan conditionalities on how funds are spent | South Africa | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: When other countries give loans or development assistance to South Africa, they should enforce strict requirements on how the funds are spent.  
 Statement 2: When other countries give South Africa loans or development assistance, they should allow our government to make its own decisions about how to use the resources.  
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Responses are identical on the question of whether foreign loans should be tied to the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights: 51% say the government should be free to make its own decisions, while 44% insist that human rights requirements should be placed on development assistance (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Human rights requirements on development finance | South Africa | 2021**

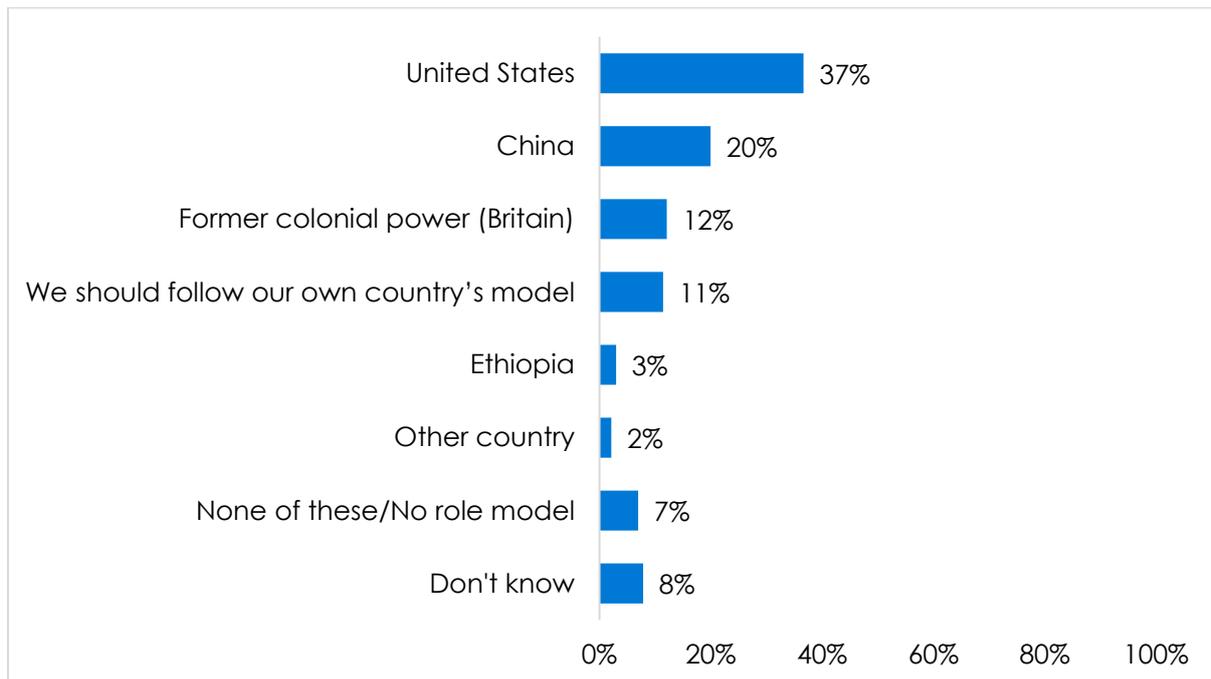


**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: When other countries give loans or development assistance to South Africa, they should enforce strict requirements to make sure our government promotes democracy and respects human rights.  
 Statement 2: Even if other countries give South Africa loans or development assistance, our government should make its own decisions about democracy and human rights.  
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

### International influences

For a developing country like South Africa, other countries can provide models worth emulating. Asked which country offers the best development model for the future of their country, more than one-third of South Africans (37%) cite the United States, followed by China (20%). Only 12% prefer the United Kingdom (Britain), South Africa's former colonial power, while about the same proportion (11%) say that the country should follow its own development model (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Best model for development | South Africa | 2021**



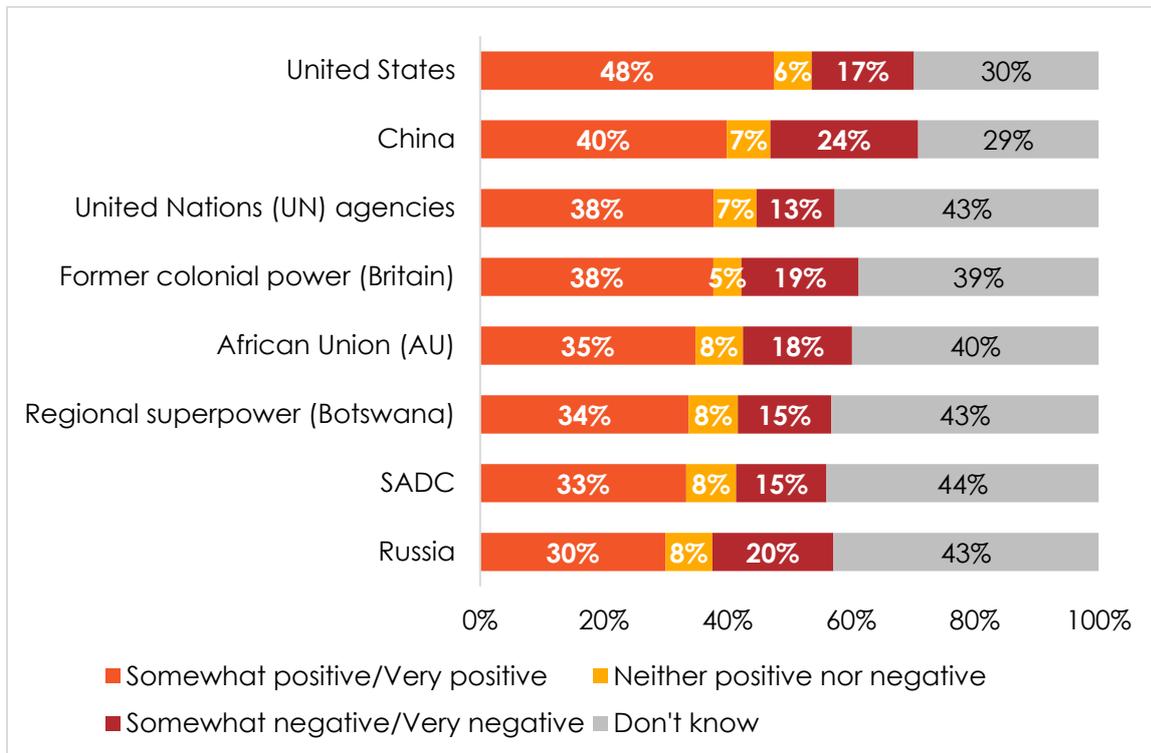
**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, which of the following countries, if any, would be the best model for the future development of our country, or is there some other country, in Africa or elsewhere, that should be our model?*

South Africans' perceptions of regional, continental, and global powers are predominantly favourable (Figure 10). Close to half (48%) of citizens say the economic and political influence of the United States in their country is "somewhat positive" or "very positive," while only 17% consider it negative. Views on China's influence are similar, with 40% of citizens describing China's influence in the country as "somewhat positive" or "very positive" while 24% see it as negative.

Positive assessments of the influence of UN agencies (38%), the United Kingdom (38%), the African Union (35%), regional superpower Botswana (34%), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (33%) also outnumber negative views. Even before its invasion of the Ukraine, Russia receives the least favourable score (30% positive, vs. 20% negative).

Across the board, substantial proportions of South Africans (ranging from 29% to 44%) do not provide a positive or negative assessment of the influence of these countries and organisations, in most cases saying they don't know enough to evaluate it.

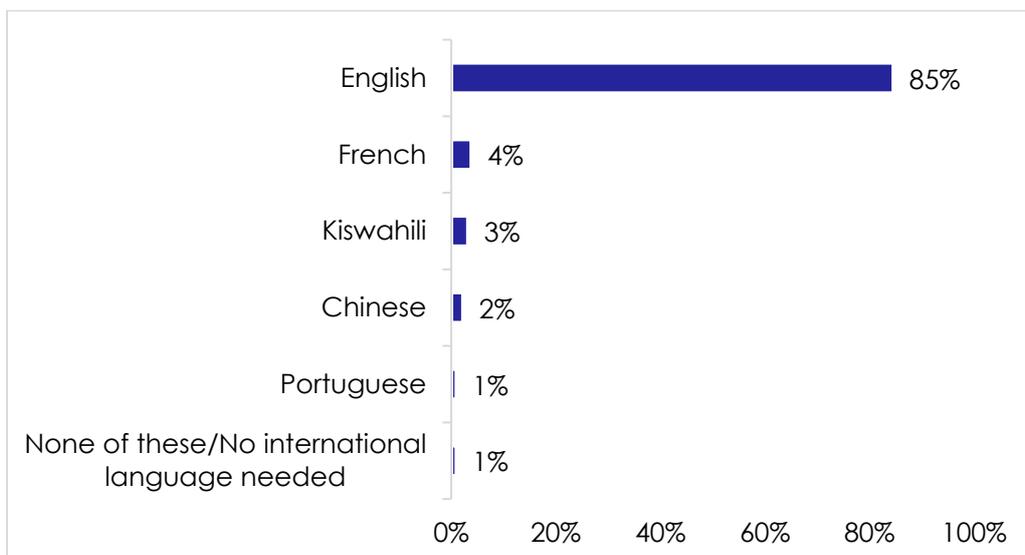
**Figure 10: External influences: positive or negative?** | South Africa | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** In general, do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries/organisations on South Africa is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Asked which international language they think is most important for young people to learn, an overwhelming majority (85%) of South Africans pick English. Only 4% of citizens cite French, 3% Kiswahili, and 2% Chinese (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Most important international language to learn** | South Africa | 2021

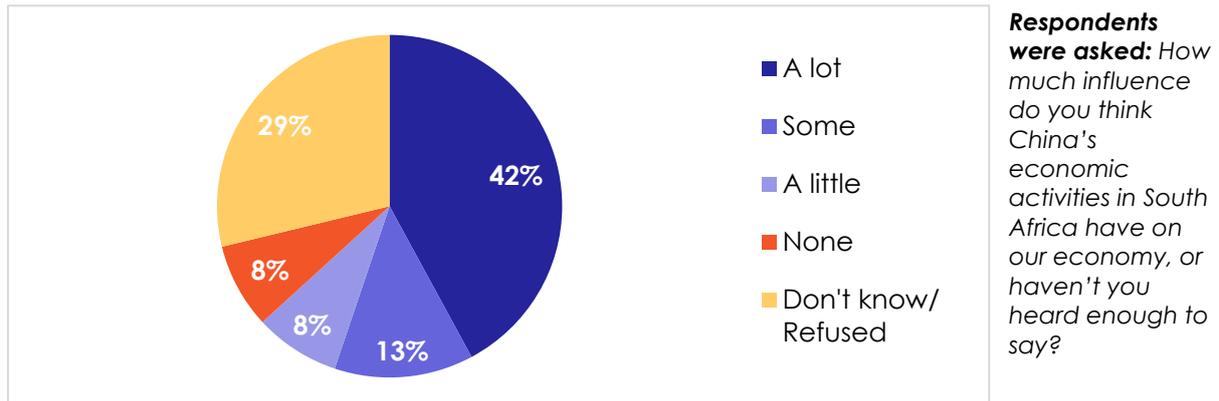


**Respondents were asked:** In thinking about the future of the next generation in our country, which of these international languages, if any, do you think is the most important for young people to learn?

### South Africa and China

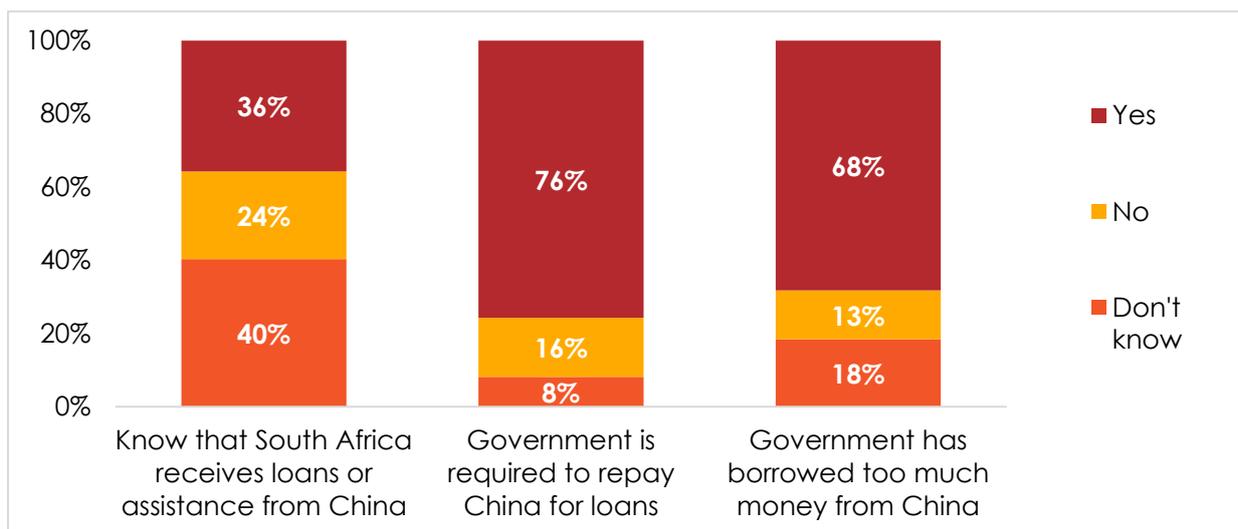
In addition to placing second among preferred development models, China is widely perceived as having an economic impact on South Africa. A majority of citizens say China's economic activities exert "a lot of influence" (42%) or "some influence" (13%) on the South African economy. Only 16% believe that China has little to no influence on South Africa's economy (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Chinese influence on the economy | South Africa | 2021**



Despite China's importance as a development partner to South Africa, fewer than four in 10 South Africans (36%) report awareness that China gives loans or development assistance to their country (Figure 13). Among those who are aware, three-quarters (76%) are also aware of the government's obligation to repay China for the loans. And more than two-thirds (68%) of South Africans say their government has borrowed too heavily from China.

**Figure 13: Chinese financial assistance | South Africa | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** To your knowledge, does China give loans or development assistance to our country's government, or haven't you had a chance to hear about this?

[If respondent answered "yes" to previous question:] Do you think that our government is required to repay China for the loans and development assistance it provides to South Africa, or haven't you heard enough to say?

[If respondent answered "yes" to the first question:] Do you think our government has borrowed too much money from China, or haven't you heard enough to say?

## Conclusion

South Africans express considerable resistance to opening their borders to foreigners and their products, although questions of free cross-border movement and free trade have strong support on both sides of the debate.

As a development model for their country, South Africans' popular preference is strongest for the United States, followed by China. And citizens welcome the economic and political influence of the United States, China, and other international players. But South Africans do not favour using external assistance, especially loans with strings attached, to finance national development, and believe that their government has already borrowed too heavily from China.

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