

# USING PUBLIC SPACE IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

local south

# Using Public Space in the Global South

Published by Local South: 4 December 2023.

Researched, written, and designed by Local South.  
Authors: Marcela Guerrero Casas and Dustin Kramer.



This research brief was made possible through a collaboration with the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Southern Africa.

■■■ HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG

For more information contact:

Marcela Guerrero Casas | [marcela@thelocalsouth.com](mailto:marcela@thelocalsouth.com)  
Dustin Kramer | [dustin@thelocalsouth.com](mailto:dustin@thelocalsouth.com)  
[www.thelocalsouth.com](http://www.thelocalsouth.com)



# 1. GLOBAL SOUTH CITIES

## INTRODUCTION

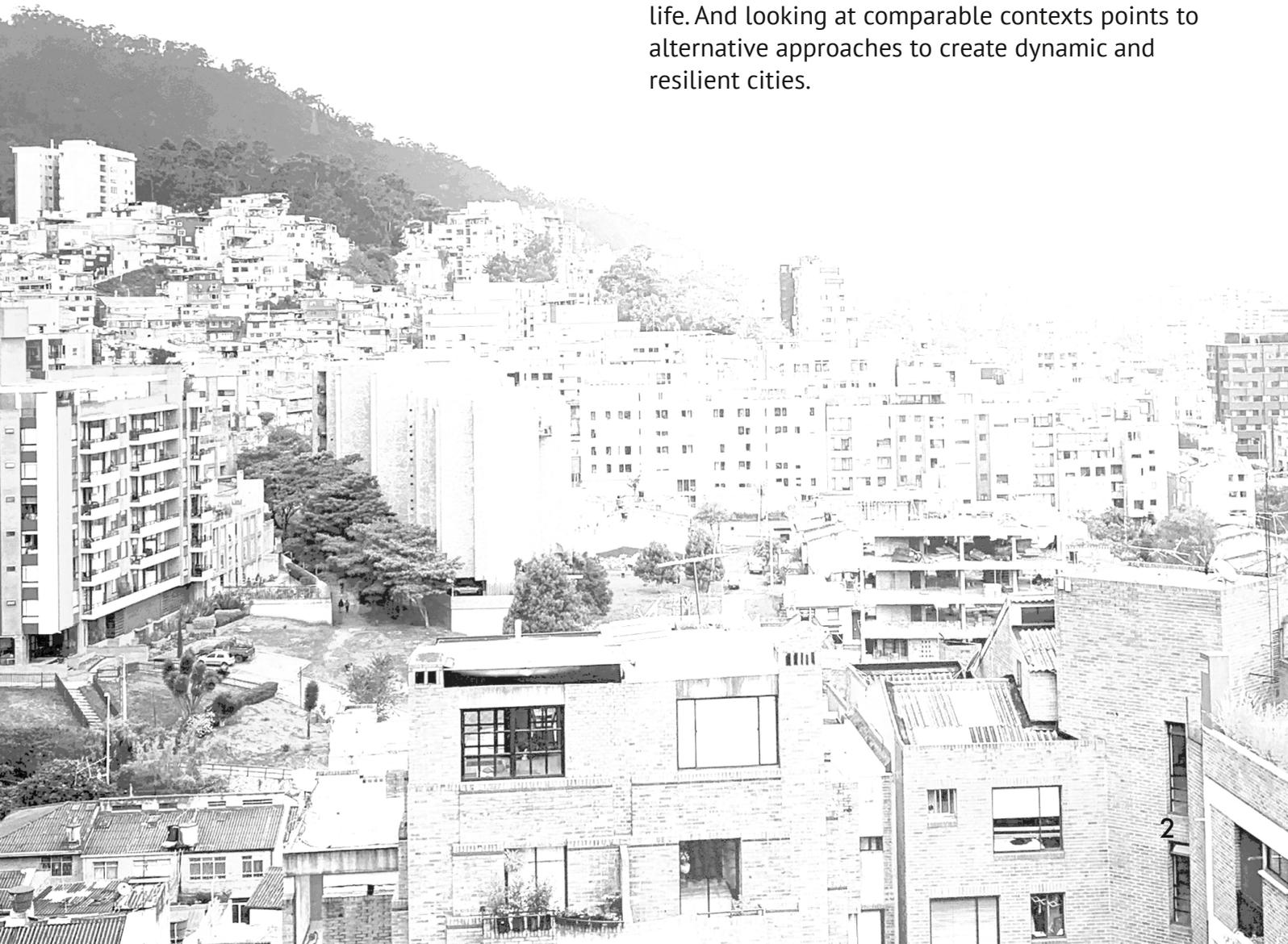
**Public space only comes alive when it is used.**

This seems obvious, but using public space in South African cities is to come up against a long history. Spatial planning during Apartheid, was not just about determining who lived where, but also about controlling the urban space through which people and politics moved.

In democratic South Africa, the legal and policy culture and framework have directly and indirectly persisted, producing a context which often snuffs out the use of public space rather than facilitating it.

From citizen initiatives and art, to informal businesses, this legacy of control permeates almost every aspect of public space.

This is highly visible across many areas of urban life. And looking at comparable contexts points to alternative approaches to create dynamic and resilient cities.



## COLOMBIA AND SOUTH AFRICA

The populations and economies of South Africa and Colombia are similar in size, as are their cities.

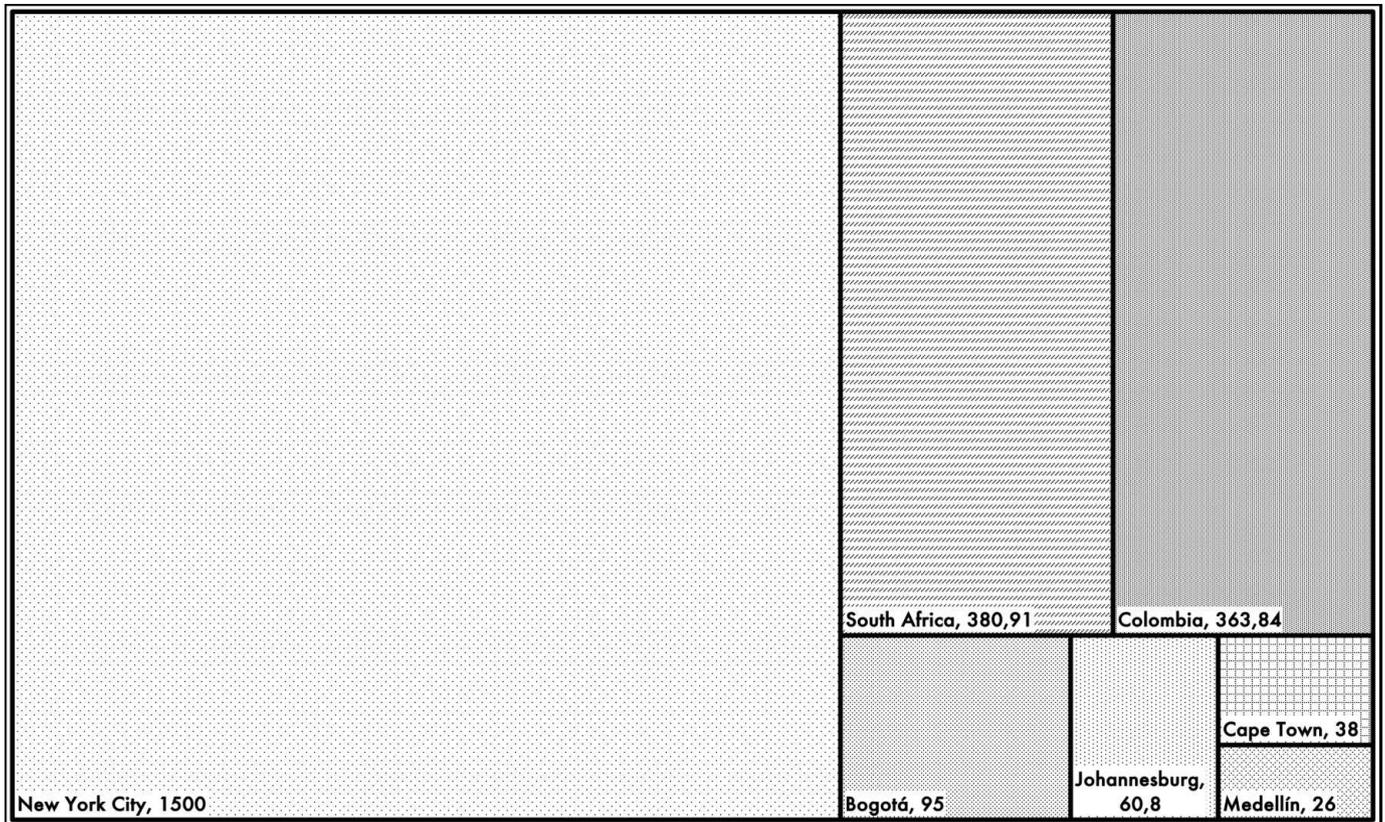
Both countries have Human Development Index levels classified as 'high' at over 0.7 (Herre & Arriagada, 2023).

But they are in the top ten countries with the highest income inequality in the world (World

Bank, 2023). The richest 10% of their populations own more than half of wealth (UNDP, n.d.). They fall within the bottom third of the World Economic Forum's Social Mobility Index (World Economic Forum, 2020), indicating the challenges in overcoming inequalities.

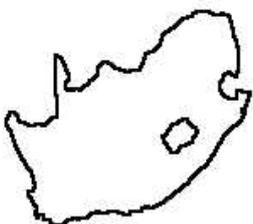
Cities in the Global North are often used as examples to learn from or emulate. However our cities are in fact dwarfed economically by cities such as New York, which has a GDP that is several times the size of the entire country of South Africa.

### Gross Domestic Product 2022-3 (US\$ Billions)



Sources: (Fitch, 2023) (IMF, 2023) (MINCIT, 2023) (New York State Comptroller, 2022) (Sierra, 2023).

### Top 5 exports



Platinum  
Gold  
Iron Ore  
Diamonds  
Coal



Crude Petroleum  
Coal  
Coffee  
Gold  
Refined Petroleum

Sources: (OEC, 2021a) (OEC, 2021b)



## OUR CITIES

The largest city is Bogotá with 7,7 million people, followed by Johannesburg and Cape Town with roughly 4,8 million people each according to the 2022 census, and Medellín with 2,6 million (Stats SA, 2023) (C40 Cities, n.d.).

As with GDP, city budgets provide an interesting view on the resources available to cities and how they use them.

Clearly again, New York City has a level of resources that is incomparable with the other cities.

### City budget (US\$ Billions)



Sources: (Herrera, 2022), (City of Cape Town, 2023), (Bolívar, 2022), (Vulekamali, 2023), (City of Johannesburg, 2023), (New York City Council, n.d.).



## 2. PUBLIC SPACE & INFORMALITY

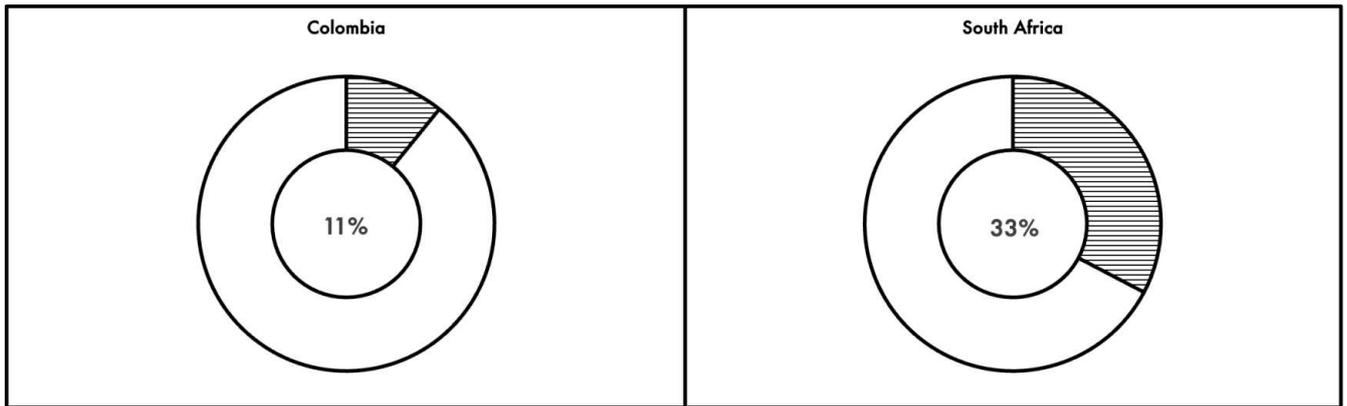
### UNEMPLOYMENT

Unemployment remains one of South Africa's deepest challenges. It is extremely high compared to most economies of similar size.

However, looking at the **split between formal and informal employment** is critical to understanding the South African context.

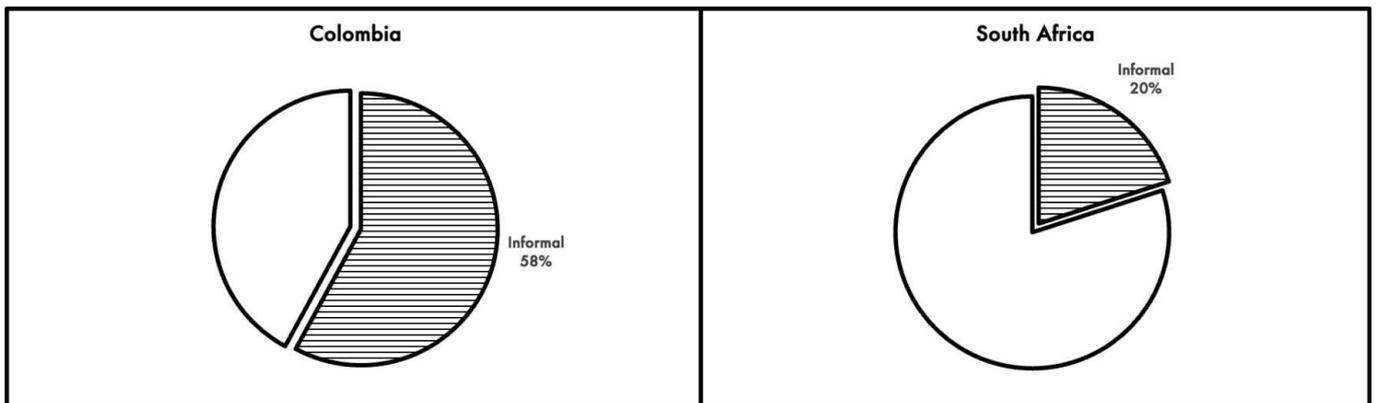
Informal employment is the percentage of total employment that is informal.

#### Unemployment rate



Sources: (Stats SA, 2023) (DANE, 2023a).

#### Percentage of employment that is informal



Sources: (Masuku & Nzewi, 2021, #), (DANE, 2023b).

While exact comparisons are challenged by how to measure informal employment, Colombia's level of informal employment is high at 58%, while South Africa's is estimated as closer to 20%.

Colombia's level is much closer to the norm in similar economies.

**South Africa is the outlier and research shows that the large number of unemployed people in South Africa would, in many other countries, be employed in the informal sector (Shah, 2022).**

That is not to romanticise the informal sector, but to acknowledge that it is an important

source of income in many countries and its absence - amongst other factors - helps to explain the extremely high levels of unemployment in South Africa.

Informality as a key component of city life and urban development is increasingly recognised and valued. In some contexts such as food and trading, this may be common and often accepted, while in other arenas, such as housing, practices might raise additional challenges.

But in these sectors, there is increasingly an acknowledgement of the need to facilitate informality rather than stop it.



## PURPOSE DRIVEN REGULATION

Using public space in South Africa is constrained by a compliance and control-driven regulatory framework.

For instance, a **temporary road closure** in most municipalities requires an event permit. And an event permit entails a host of expensive and onerous regulations.

**Informal trading** is another example. The regressive regulation in South African cities constrains informal economic activity in public space, a contradiction given the levels of unemployment, which helps to explain why in comparable economies, the informal economy makes up more than half of total employment.

Bylaws (which build on various pieces of national legislation) across our cities make it difficult to partake in the informal economy and give law enforcement agencies significant power to control, confiscate, and even criminally sanction informal vendors (Modiba, 2022) (Xolo, 2023) (Mohlala, 2023).

This is not to say that there should be no regulation. Public space is just that - public. There needs to be a **rational policy and legal framework** to govern its use so that there is a broad public benefit.

Regulations are essential to activate space and enable its use. Although imperfect, there are governmental efforts to achieve better policy. The City of Cape Town hosts an annual Informal Economy Summit & Expo where these issues are explored. In Bogotá there is an entire city department that focuses on managing public space.

These efforts could result in **regulations that promote, rather than prevent**, the use of public space.

In fact, there are **examples in Bogotá and Cape Town** that illustrate the importance of appropriate legal frameworks and the multiple-benefits and value that can be leveraged from enabling the use of public space for public good.



## **Public Food Markets**

**19** markets on public land  
**Run** by City of Bogota's IPES  
**Program** offers management, training, and infrastructure  
**Markets** include fresh produce, gastronomy, herbal medicine, crafts, and more

## **Public Space Department**

**Founded** in 1999  
**Maintains** and manages public space  
**Oversees** the City's real estate asset inventory  
**Celebrates** an annual 'public space day'  
**Hosts** the Bogotá Public Space Observatory, a data platform  
**Publishes** a "green public space index"

## **Ciclovía**

**Founded** in 1976  
**127 km** are car-free streets on Sundays and holidays  
**Recognised** as the world's largest linear park  
**2 million** people use it  
**300** staff members  
**500** student volunteers  
**Over 200** informal vendors

BOGOTA

## City Improvement Districts

**21 CIDs** in Cape Town  
**Facilitate** collaboration between public and private to improve public spaces  
**Fund** public amenities like temporary public toilets  
**Collaborate** to provide support to homeless populations  
**Work** with the City to develop more pedestrian-friendly spaces  
**Co-create** neighbourhood-level interventions

## Langa Bicycle Hub

**Founded** in 2020  
**Collaborates** with the City for young cyclists to access public land  
**Provides** training, mechanical services and a safe space for children and cycling  
**15 people** work at the hub, including volunteers  
**Offers** weekly learn to cycle lessons  
**Sells** 17 bicycles per month

CAPE TOWN

## Community Initiatives

**Active** communities work around the city  
**Fundraise** for public amenities (e.g. Mowbray Community Action Network)  
**Work** with NGOs to support local food markets (e.g. TCOE market)  
**Collaborations** with informal reclaimers for waste collection and recycling  
**Organise** bicycle buses for children

## FINDING INSPIRATION

Despite the perception of informal activity in public space leading to disorder and crime, there is evidence to suggest that using public space for multiple purposes can help improve safety (Safer Spaces, n.d.).

For example, Bogotá's weekly Ciclovía programme which turns 127km of streets into car-free public spaces attracts a large number of informal vendors. The increased number of people on foot, bicycle and on the street more generally creates a sense of safety across a city which similarly struggles with crime.

Similarly, by facilitating rather than constraining

places like markets, they continue to be important places in their neighbourhoods (Casas & Kramer, 2022).

On our **Global South Public Space Platform**, we have begun collecting interesting examples of such practices. This is just the beginning of unpacking, exploring, and testing new ways of using public space in the Global South.



# References

Bolívar, S. C. (2022, December 24). Alcalde Quintero decretó presupuesto para 2023; no se repite vigencia actual. *El Tiempo*. <https://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/medellin/alcalde-quintero-decreto-presupuesto-de-2023-no-se-repite-vigencia-actual-728293>

C40 Cities. (n.d.). Our Cities. <https://www.c40.org/cities/>

Casas, M. G., & Kramer, D. (2022, November 28). Food markets in SA – a universe of potential unity to explore. *Daily Maverick*. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-11-28-the-market-square-in-south-africa-and-colombia-a-universe-of-potential-unity-to-explore/>

City of Cape Town. (2023, March 28). “Building Hope” budget for 2023/24. <https://www.capetown.gov.za/Media-and-news/A%20Budget%20for%20Building%20Hope>

City of Johannesburg. (2023, June 13). CITY OF JOHANNESBURG BUDGET SPEECH ADDRESS BY CLR SELLO DADA MORERO ON THE 13 JUNE 2023 AT THE METRO CENTRE, BRAAMFONTEIN AT 14.: [https://www.joburg.org.za/media/\\_Documents/CITY%20OF%20JOHANNESBURG%20BUDGET%20SPEECH%202023.pdf](https://www.joburg.org.za/media/_Documents/CITY%20OF%20JOHANNESBURG%20BUDGET%20SPEECH%202023.pdf)

DANE. (2023b). Empleo informal y seguridad social. Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística. <https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/mercado-laboral/empleo-informal-y-seguridad-social>

DANE. (2023a). Empleo y desempleo. Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística. <https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/mercado-laboral/empleo-y-desempleo>

Fitch. (2023, June 16). Fitch Affirms Medellín's Ratings. *Fitch Ratings*. <https://www.fitchratings.com/research/international-public-finance/fitch-affirms-medellin-ratings-10-11-2022#:~:text=The%20City%20of%20Medellin%20is,higher%20than%20the%20national%20average>

Herre, B., & Arriagada, P. (2023, November 1). The Human Development Index and related indices: what they are and what we can learn from them. *Our World in Data*. <https://ourworldindata.org/human-development-index>

Herrera, C. C. (2022, December 15). Presupuesto de Bogotá para 2023: inversión social, movilidad y más. *City of Bogotá*. <https://bogota.gov.co/mi-ciudad/hacienda/presupuesto-de-bogota-para-2023-inversion-social-movilidad-y-mas>

IMF. (2023). World Economic Outlook (October 2023) - GDP, current prices. *International Monetary Fund*. <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPD@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD>

IPES. (2023, July 4). Plazas de Mercado. *Instituto Para La Economía Social*. <https://www.ipes.gov.co/index.php/programas/plazas-de-mercado>

Masuku, B., & Nzewi, O. (2021, May). The South African informal sector's socio-economic exclusion from basic service provisions: A critique of Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality's approach to the informal sector. *Journal of Energy in Southern Africa*, 32(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2413-3051/2021/v32i2a5856>

MINCIT. (2023, October). Perfiles Económicos Departamentales Departamento de Bogotá D.C. <https://www.mincit.gov.co/getattachment/d3043afa-21d0-4f36-8179-7fbeeef255d2/Bogota.aspx>

Modiba, M. (2022, October 12). Johannesburg's informal traders face abuse: the city's 'world class' aspirations create hostility towards them. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/johannesburgs-informal-traders-face-abuse-the-citys-world-class-aspirations-create-hostility-towards-them-190781>

Mohlala, J. (2023, September 22). Cape Town's informal traders in permit struggle. Daily Maverick. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-09-22-cape-towns-informal-traders-in-permit-struggle/>

New York City Council. (n.d.). Fiscal Year 2023 Budget. NYC Council. <https://council.nyc.gov/budget/fy2023/>

New York State Comptroller. (2022). 2022 Financial Condition Report For Fiscal Year Ended March 31, 2022: Economic and Demographic Trends. <https://www.osc.ny.gov/reports/finance/2022-fcr/economic-and-demographic-trends>

OECD. (2021a). Colombia (COL) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners. The Observatory of Economic Complexity. <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/col>

OECD. (2021b). South Africa (ZAF) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners. The Observatory of Economic Complexity. <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/zaf>

Safer Spaces. (n.d.). Public spaces: More than 'just space' – Understand – SaferSpaces. <https://www.saferspaces.org.za/understand/entry/public-spaces>

Shah, K. (2022, September). Diagnosing South Africa's High Unemployment and Low Informality, Working Paper No. 138. Harvard Growth Lab. <https://growthlab.hks.harvard.edu/files/growthlab/files/2022-09-cid-fellows-wp-138-south-africa-labor-markets.pdf>

Sierra, C. S. (2023, May 30). Bogotá, Antioquia y Valle aportaron 50% del PIB, que en 2023 llegó a \$1.462,52 billones. La Republica. <https://www.larepublica.co/economia/bogota-antioquia-y-valle-del-cauca-concentraron-casi-50-del-pib-del-ano-pasado-3626253>

Stats SA. (2023). Stats SA Census Portal. <https://census.statssa.gov.za/#/>

Stats SA. (2023, May 16). Beyond unemployment – Time-Related Underemployment in the SA labour market. Statistics South Africa. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=16312>

UNDP. (n.d.). Mapping income inequality: the bottom 40 and top 10 percent | Data Futures Platform. Data Futures Platform. <https://data.undp.org/insights/mapping-income-inequality>

Vulekamali. (2023). Consolidated Budget Summary. Vulekamali: SA Online Budget Data. <https://vulekamali.gov.za/budget-summary>

World Bank. (2023, June 16). Gini Index. The World Bank: Data. [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?most\\_recent\\_value\\_desc=true](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?most_recent_value_desc=true)

World Economic Forum. (2020). The Global Social Mobility Report 2020 Equality, Opportunity and a New Economic Imperative. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/Global\\_Social\\_Mobility\\_Report.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/Global_Social_Mobility_Report.pdf)

Xolo, N. (2023, June 16). Informal traders march against by-law amendments. Groundup. [http://www.groundup.org.za/article/informal-traders-march-over-law-amendments/?\\_ga=2.175379234.1613508598.1701238677-1864450173.1699003516](http://www.groundup.org.za/article/informal-traders-march-over-law-amendments/?_ga=2.175379234.1613508598.1701238677-1864450173.1699003516)