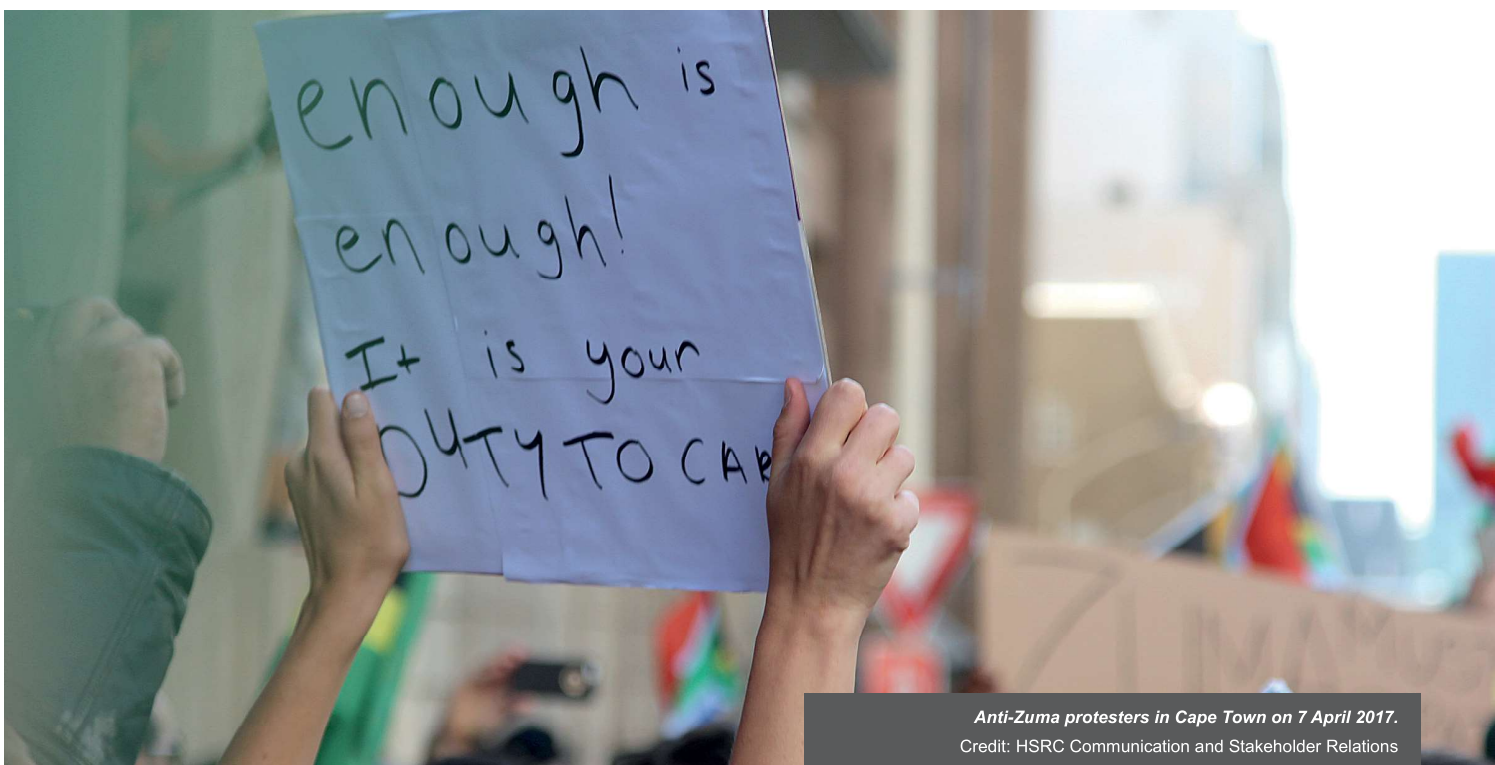


RESULTS FROM THE SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL ATTITUDES SURVEY (SASAS) CHALLENGING CORRUPTION

Changes in the public recognition of corruption as a societal priority in South Africa



Anti-Zuma protesters in Cape Town on 7 April 2017.
Credit: HSRC Communication and Stakeholder Relations

Corruption in South Africa has become a source of considerable debate over the last decade. The subsequent rise of social movements and anti-corruption protests has created the impression that citizens are becoming more aware of, and concerned with corruption. In this article, **Benjamin Roberts, Ngqapheli Mchunu, Steven Gordon, and Jaré Struwig** examine survey data on the public concern with corruption over the past fourteen years to determine whether such assumptions can be corroborated with empirical evidence.

Corruption is often regarded as a significant impediment to efforts aimed at promoting social and economic development, and consolidating democracy in both developing and developed countries. The South African government has pledged to take a tough stance on corruption. The country is a signatory to the United Nations (UN) Convention against Corruption, while the National Development Plan 2030 envisages a South Africa that has zero tolerance for corruption. Despite such commitments, increased reporting by the media, whistle-blowers, and watchdog institutions on corruption involving leaders in government, the private sector and civil society has raised concerns about the fragility of South African democracy, and led to appeals for a vigilant public and accountable governance. Questions, however, remain concerning the extent to which the public gives attention to, and demands a response on, issues of corruption and how has this changed over time.

Data

In an attempt to provide initial responses to such questions, we analysed data from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). The SASAS series consists of nationally representative, repeated cross-sectional surveys that have been conducted annually by the HSRC since 2003. The survey series has an average sample of approximately 3,000 adults aged 16 years and older living in private residence, with surveying typically conducted in the last quarter of each calendar year. We use data from all fourteen annual rounds conducted to date, covering the period from 2003 to 2016. Specifically, we rely on a standard question aimed at assessing public opinion about national priorities, which is phrased as follows: “Please

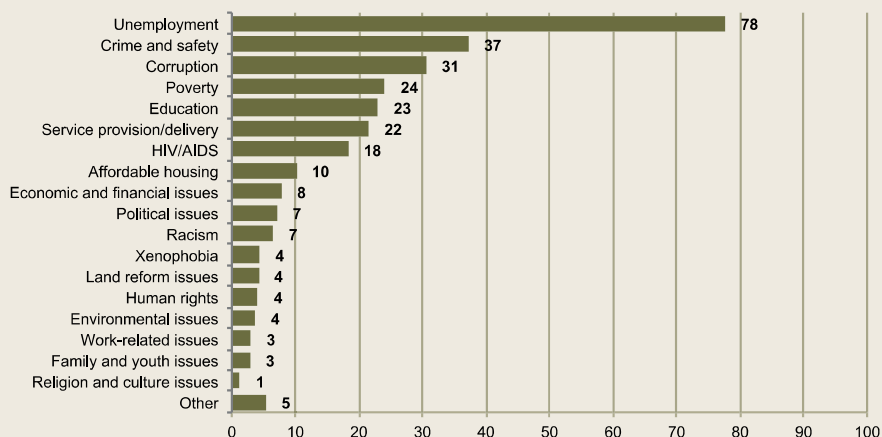
tell me what you think are the three most important challenges facing South Africa today?” Respondents provided up to three answers in their own words, which were recorded and then grouped into broader analytical categories. The question refers to the country as a whole, so responses deal with national concerns, rather than local-level or personal problems.

Corruption as a societal challenge

In Figure 1, we present the 2016 national distribution of results based on the above mentioned question. Unemployment remains the most pressing issue mentioned by the

public, reported by 78% of the adult population. This is the predominant concern among the public by a considerable margin, a finding that has remained consistent across all rounds of interviewing conducted since the early 2000s. Crime and safety is the second highest ranked concern (37%), followed by corruption, which was reported by slightly less than a third of South Africans (31%). A third cluster of reported priority challenges were mentioned by between a fifth and a quarter of adults, and include poverty, education, service delivery and HIV/AIDS. All other issues featuring on the public agenda were mentioned by a tenth or less of adults.

Fig 1 The three most important challenges facing South Africa today, 2016 (% mentioning each challenge)



Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2016

Note: Data are weighted to be nationally representative of the adult (16 years and older).

The fact that corruption is listed by the public as one of the top three challenges facing our society is particularly noteworthy. It suggests that this issue is recognised as a sizeable threat to the functioning of democracy that warrants as much policy attention as issues such as crime, poverty and education. The question remains whether this has always been the case. To provide further insight into this, in Figure 2 we examine changes in the reporting of corruption as a societal challenge over a period from 2003

to 2016. What we observe is a dramatic shift in public attitudes on the importance of corruption as a national problem over the period 2003-2016 (Figure 2). The share of the adult population that viewed corruption as a ‘most important’ challenge grew by 21 percentage points between 2003 and 2016, rising from 9% to 31% over this period. The largest part of this surge in concern occurred during the latter half of the period under review.

Fig 2 Percentages identifying corruption as one of the top three challenges, 2003-2016



Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2003-2016
 Note: Data are weighted to be nationally representative of the adult (16 years and older).

Changes in the ranking of items in the list of societal challenges mentioned by the public has a tendency to be shaped by contextual circumstances, especially the perceived responsiveness and performance of government in addressing social problems through policy and programmatic interventions. Consider, for example, public concern about HIV/AIDS. Between 2003 and 2008, approximately 50% of adult South Africans said that HIV/AIDS was a critical challenge facing the country. In the subsequent period from 2008 to 2016, great improvements were being made in the fight against the epidemic through the rapid rollout of antiretroviral therapy (ART), and the successes of the Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) programme. During this time, the public responded favourably to these developments, resulting in a reduction in their general concern for this problem. By 2016, only 18% cited that HIV/AIDS was one of the top challenges. By contrast, for issues such as job creation and crime reduction, which features as the most pressing challenges in the public agenda, there has been little change between 2003 and 2016, accompanied by broad-based dissatisfaction with evaluations

of government performance in dealing with these issues. Over the past five years (2012-2016), only a 12% average were satisfied with government's efforts in addressing corruption. This poor evaluation of state performance in fighting corruption is likely to explain, in part, why the issue has been steadily rising as a priority in the public agenda.

Who is worried about corruption?

Having observed the appreciable rise in concern over corruption since the early 2000s, a remaining consideration is whether this

concern is broadly or differentially shared. To give some insight on this, Table 1 presents changes in the share identifying corruption as a top challenge based on select socio-demographic characteristics. Firstly, we find a significant, broad-based increase in concern over time, based on race, geographic location and educational attainment. Secondly, there are distinct differences in the size of the increase over time. This means the important group-based variation in levels of concern continue to exist despite the general tendency towards rising levels of worry about this issue.

Table 1: Percentages identifying corruption as one of the top three challenges by selected subgroups, 2003-2016

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Change 2003-2016
Population group															
Black African	6	10	7	8	11	10	15	16	22	23	20	20	26	28	+22
Coloured	17	9	20	20	24	19	17	23	26	30	30	28	32	30	+13
Indian	15	16	23	16	20	20	22	36	37	41	42	38	38	45	+29
White	23	22	31	37	32	35	37	34	50	46	52	50	60	50	+27
Geographic location															
Urban formal	11	12	13	17	18	17	19	24	30	34	29	27	36	37	+26
Urban informal	8	5	8	7	9	8	13	11	28	18	27	26	27	20	+12
Trad. auth. area	6	11	8	6	9	10	17	14	19	18	16	18	15	21	+16
Rural formal	9	9	20	12	19	13	17	13	22	29	16	16	22	32	+23
Educational attainment															
Primary and below	6	8	10	7	10	11	16	20	18	23	17	20	26	22	+16



Anti-Zuma protesters in Cape Town on 7 April 2017.
Credit: HSRC Communication and Stakeholder Relations

For instance, concern over corruption has grown exponentially for all population groups over time, especially over the 2009-2016 period. For all, except coloured adults, the share mentioning corruption as a societal priority rose by more than 20 percentage points between 2003 and 2016. In 2003, the share of black African adults mentioning corruption as a national priority was nearly four times lower than white adults (6% versus 23%), with Indian and coloured adults slightly less inclined than white adults to mention this issue as a challenge (15% and 17%). The changes observed show that approximately a third of black African and coloured adults cited corruption as a critical challenge in 2016, however, such concern still remains higher among Indian and white adults (45% and 50% respectively).

Among formal urban dwellers concern rose from 11% in 2003, to 37% in 2016, while for those living in rural, traditional authority areas,

the rate of growth in concern was slower but nonetheless sizeable (from 6% to 21%). Interestingly, educational differences are also apparent. For those with a tertiary education, there was a 22 percentage point change in their level of concern over this period. This change was higher than for those with lower educational levels. This pattern means that by 2016, 45% of the tertiary-educated mentioned corruption as a challenge compared to 22% of those with primary or no formal schooling.

Concluding remarks

This article has shown that a growing share of South Africans recognise corruption as a challenge facing the country, to the extent that it now features in the top three ranked issues by the public in general. This mounting concern is not confined to particular segments of the population, but is evident across a range of socio-economic and demographic groups, even

though disparities continue to exist. Based on the evidence, it is our opinion that the intensifying salience attached to corruption represents an appeal from the public for a concerted and decisive policy response. We appear to be witnessing the emergence of more vigilant, demanding and active citizenship that are striving to hold leaders to account, and ensure a democracy free of corruption. In line with the constitutional principles of responsiveness to people's needs and accountable public administration, it is imperative that political and civic leaders in South Africa take heed of public concerns, and work together with all sectors in society to offer responsible leadership on this important issue.

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