

AN OVERVIEW: The shape and character of poverty and inequality in South Africa

The HSRC recently held a conference under the theme *Poverty and Inequality: Diagnosis, Prognosis and Responses*, which is also the organisation’s main research agenda for the next five years. What is the nature of the problem? What symptoms or indicators do we have to examine? **Liapeng Matsau** deliberates about complexities that surfaced during the discussions and presentations.

Despite making great strides in transformation and development in the last two decades, South Africa continues to be plagued by poverty and inequality. More than half of the country’s citizens live in poverty.

One of the main reasons for this is the slow growth of the economy, which in turn is caused by both global and national issues. Locating the cause of poverty with economic growth issues only addresses one of many interlinking aspects of the problems of poverty and inequality.

The use of the medical terminology in the conference theme, *Poverty and Inequality: Diagnosis, Prognosis and Responses*, is apt in two ways. On the one hand, it alludes to a nation that is ailing, one that is suffering from poverty and inequality; on the other it suggests that this nation is a complex organism with dozens of deeply entwined systems, the mechanisms of which preclude easy answers.

What is the nature of the problem? We know that between 45.5-53.8% (depending on the definition) of South Africans live in *poverty*. What symptoms or indicators do we have to examine? The country suffers from very low levels

of income, high unemployment, poor sanitation and water, and not enough housing; these symptoms do not affect everybody equally and are connected to each other. How do we diagnose inequality and what is the nature of the problem?

South Africa has one of the highest levels of *inequality* in the world. What are the symptoms at hand? The country is characterised by vast income inequality and unequal access to education, health, and housing to name a few. Indeed, South Africa has often been described as being two nations in one, one for the rich and privileged, and one for the poor and disenfranchised.

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The prognosis refers to the expected outcome, or the trajectory of a condition. Is the expected outcome good or poor? What can be done to improve the prognosis? Will South Africa’s vision of inclusive growth and development lead to a narrowing inequality gap and a reduction in poverty? Will poverty and inequality increase and lead to escalating challenges to social cohesion? In many ways, the conference, in its recognition of the challenges faced by the nation, was at heart optimistic, or at least hopeful.

What then do we mean when we talk about responses to poverty and inequality? This refers to key strategic interventions that can be made to mitigate poverty and inequality. How will the HSRC respond? What interventions will it recommend to government? What new directions in research will it embark on? And how can the country be transformed?

The role of research in mitigating poverty and inequality

We know that research alone cannot effect change. However, policy-oriented research, which is broadly defined as research that has an audience outside academia, plays a crucial role in enabling policy that makes a difference.

Policy-oriented research is more narrowly defined as ‘research aimed primarily at affecting choices made by governments or other institutions whose decisions are embodied in laws, regulations, or other activities that generate benefits and costs for people who are affected by those governments or institutions’.

While it is true that research cannot in and of itself alleviate poverty or inequality, it certainly provides the information and tools to make the necessary interventions at policy level

and evidence-based research is vital to this endeavour. But how can and should research help us to deal with problems – problems of inequality, problems of poverty, problems of vicious cycles and seemingly insurmountable mechanisms of reproduction?

The spectrum of research involvement is broad and it is relevant to spend moment where social sciences can impact policy, either directly by providing evidence, or indirectly by building the tools needed to produce innovative research:

Unpacking, updating and formulating the key concepts: there is no straightforward answer to the question ‘what constitutes poverty and inequality’, and the definitions of what constitutes poverty or what instances of inequality are problematic have been changing, often to reflect changes in society.

This is particularly the case with the rapid changes introduced by modern technologies, access to which increasingly plays a part in the reproduction of poverty and inequality.

Develop methods to address these questions

Besides the conceptual questions regarding poverty and inequality, any attempt at providing a detailed and appropriately complex description of the extent of the problem requires the appropriate measures and indicators.

Taking stock of the problem: it is crucial to identifying the underlying mechanisms to first account for the details of the problem by analysis measures and indicators, especially in connection to other relevant variables and measures.

Explaining and understanding: knowing how dire a problem is, is not yet sufficient to propose answers; it is critically important to understand social, economic, historical and psychological forces that make poverty and inequality persistent.

Intervention assessment: a clearer understanding of the causes of poverty or inequality – which is then evidenced and

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drawn upon to formulate policy which is enacted – does not mark the end of research involvement, since the catalogue of tools and definitions available to gain this initial understanding also plays a crucial role in assessing the efficacy of specific policy approaches, allowing policy makers access to evidence-based learning regarding policy effectiveness.

Crucial role of research

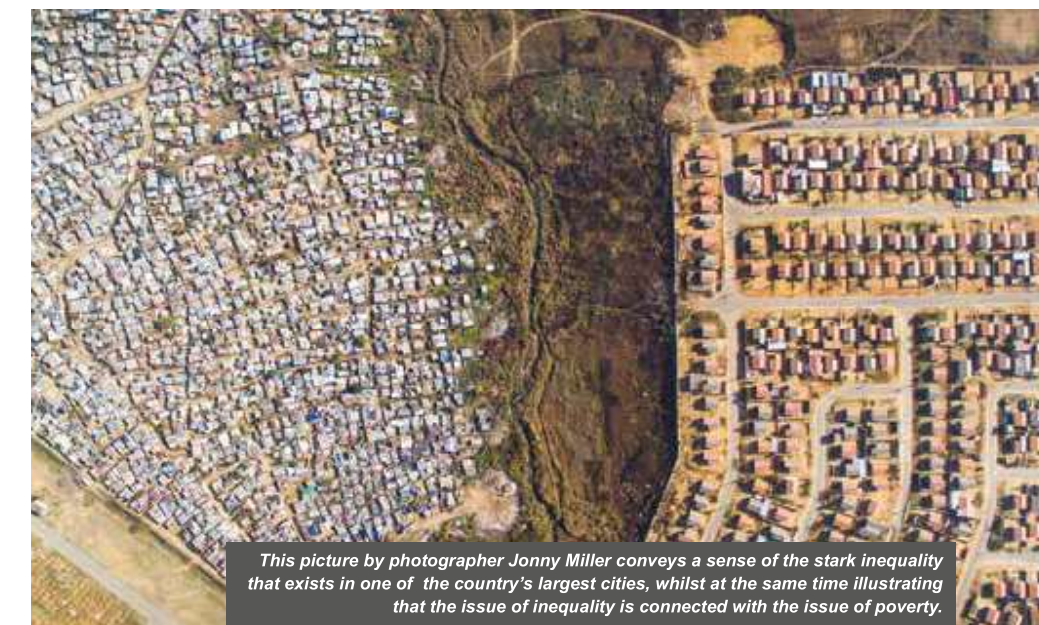
Research is crucial in defining the problem, establishing the extent of the problem and the processes by which it persists or arises to inform possible intervention, and then assessing the effectiveness of the treatment, to return to the medical metaphor.

It is also crucial to note that policy intervention is itself a well-spring of information and potential insight that, in turn, might innovate new conceptual understandings, methodologies and measures to employ, and explanatory approaches.

Research not only stands to effect change by informing policy, but also, in doing so, can progress through the outcomes of the policy implementation. It might even be worth noting that researchers have a tendency to lament policy decision that did not draw on evidence-based research, but rarely do they openly speak of the impact of evidence on policy as somewhat experimental, that is, as the best projected intervention to address complex issues giving no guarantees.

Given the wealth of ways in which research can participate in the fight against poverty and inequality, it is important to note that South Africa needs to solve the problem of poverty and inequality by moving beyond simply identifying problems (diagnosis), and instead trying to innovatively unpack, describe, understand, address and reassess the problem at hand.

Author: Dr Liapeng Matsau, deputy director, office of the deputy CEO: Research, HSRC.



This picture by photographer Jonny Miller conveys a sense of the stark inequality that exists in one of the country’s largest cities, whilst at the same time illustrating that the issue of inequality is connected with the issue of poverty.