

ARE YOU BEING SERVED?

Perceptions of service delivery

As the third decade of democracy in our country draws near, issues of service delivery continue to be vigorously discussed and debated in the media, among policymakers and in communities alike. In this article, *Hangwefani Hope Magidmisha, Ben Roberts, Steven Gordon and Jarè Struwig* examine satisfaction with government provided services over the last decade, profile socio-demographic differences in such perceptions, and explore the relationship between service delivery attitudes and measures of political support and action.

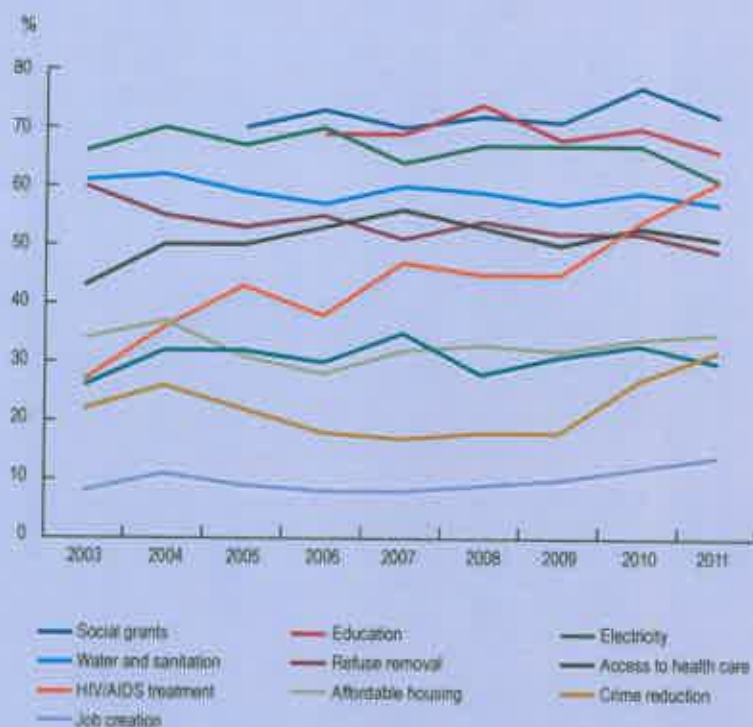
Since its inception in 2003, the HSRC's annual South African Social Attitude Survey (SASAS) has asked representative samples of adults aged 16 years and older to evaluate government performance in relation to certain public services and priority areas.

These include education, electricity, water and sanitation, refuse removal, health care and HIV/AIDS treatment, social grants, low-cost housing as well as crime reduction and job creation. Question responses were captured using a five-point scale ranging from 'very satisfied' to 'very dissatisfied'. The number of respondents in each survey from 2003 to 2011 ranged between 2 500 and 3 300.

Satisfaction with services

The survey results reveal a considerable pattern of variance in the way the public perceives government performance across the ten dimensions examined. In late 2011, a significant majority of South Africans voiced satisfaction with social grants (72%) and education (66%). Slightly lower shares offered their approval of state efforts on electricity provision (61%), HIV/AIDS treatment (61%) and water and sanitation (57%). About half were positive in their rating of access to health care and refuse removal (51% and 49% respectively). The areas of greatest public concern were job creation (14%), crime reduction (32%) and low-cost housing (35%).

Figure 1: Level of satisfaction with different areas of government performance, 2003 – 2011 (% satisfied or very satisfied)



Source: HSRC SASAS 2003-2011

When contrasting the government emphasis on reducing backlogs and providing basic services to all citizens with the incidence of protest action in recent years, a fundamental question raised is how and to what degree have service delivery performance ratings

changed over the last decade? Figure 1 shows that satisfaction levels have fluctuated within a fairly narrow range and the ranking of services has not changed appreciably over the decade.



Photo: David Hemmell

Discontent with service delivery has begun to erode public confidence in political institutions and leaders

However, we wish to highlight two notable exceptions. Firstly, there has been a dramatic improvement in assessments of the fight against HIV/AIDS between 2003 and 2011, with the share of adults satisfied with HIV/AIDS interventions more than doubling over the interval (from 27% to 61%). Secondly, there has been a notable rise in confidence in the state's crime reduction efforts from 2009 onwards (18% in 2009; 33% in 2011).

There has also recently been a modest decline in satisfaction with education and electricity. This will need to be monitored, particularly given the increasing attention being devoted to the state of education in the country as well as rising affordability and quality considerations in the domestic energy sector.

Service delivery and deprivation

To understand who feels satisfied with services in South Africa, the question responses were combined into a single service delivery index. The scales were reversed and summed, and then transformed into a 0–100 score, where '0' represents 'very dissatisfied' and '100' 'very satisfied' with services. We have focused on the 2006–2011 period as all service delivery items were included in these surveys.

The average service index scores based on a set of personal and household-level features for both the 2006–2011 period and for 2011, suggest that there is minimal, yet statistically significant gender-based difference in satisfaction, with women offering lower evaluations. Equally, there are modest race-based differences, with black Africans less satisfied compared with other population groups over the period. Yet, in 2011, this difference was not evident.

There is substantial variation in service satisfaction based on socioeconomic status. The mean satisfaction score for those with high living standards is 1.5 times greater than those with low living standards (38 versus 56). In addition, those subjectively reporting that they are 'very poor' tend to have service satisfaction levels that are 1.6 times lower than those classifying themselves as 'wealthy' (36 versus 59). This suggests that there is an association between service delivery perceptions and social disadvantage.

Class-based differences are again present when examining the data from a spatial perspective. Provinces such as the Eastern

Cape, North West, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo tend to report the lowest service delivery scores. Also, residents in formal urban areas generally report greater service delivery satisfaction than those in informal urban settlements and rural areas. Those based in traditional rural authority areas are the least content with services.

Consequences for political support and behaviour

Satisfaction with service delivery appears to influence political attitudes. We took the service delivery index scores for 2011 and categorised them into five equal groups (or quintiles). We then analysed the data to see if there were differences in relation to views on democracy, confidence in political institutions and leaders.

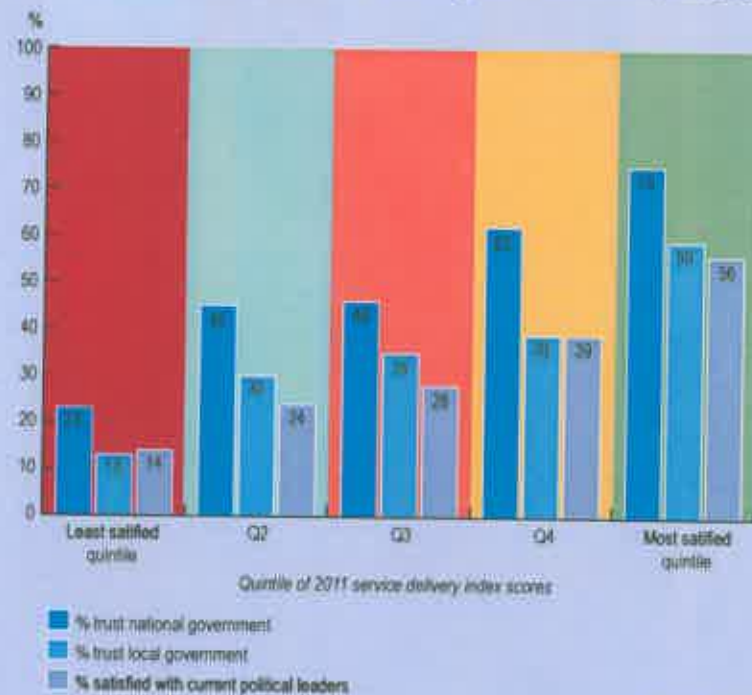
Figure 2 shows that those with lower satisfaction scores are less satisfied with the way democracy is working in South Africa compared to those with higher scores. Similarly, those that are less content with

Figure 2: Views on democracy by level of service delivery satisfaction, 2011 (%)



Source: HSRC/SASAS 2011

Figure 3: Confidence in political institutions and leaders by level of service delivery satisfaction, 2011 (%)



Source: HSRC/SASAS 2011

service delivery are more inclined to feel that things in the country are going in the wrong direction.

We also find that discontent with service delivery has begun to erode public confidence in political institutions and leaders. As the level of service satisfaction increases, so does trust in national and local government and support for the country's political leadership (Figure 3).

Given the attention devoted to service delivery protests in recent years, we also examined the relationship between service perceptions and political behaviour. Unlike political attitudes, discontent with service delivery has not yet translated into clearly discernible patterns of political action, irrespective of whether one examines voting intention, contacting political authorities or engaging in mass demonstrations.

Concluding reflections

Patterns of service delivery satisfaction over the last decade have typically varied within a narrow range, with state responses to demands for job creation, crime reduction and housing provision being the most critically evaluated. The public acknowledge the progress made regarding the HIV/AIDS

pandemic and ensuring personal safety. Levels of service delivery discontent relate to patterns of inequality in our society. Those with higher levels of deprivation exhibit greater dissatisfaction with service delivery.

The analysis further demonstrated that such discontent is adversely impacting on indicators of political support. These include general views on the nature of our democracy, and specific assessments of confidence in political institutions and leadership. Surprisingly, perceptions of service delivery have not yielded strong distinctions in reported political action.

These findings emphasise the importance of investing in pro-poor interventions that address social inequalities in keeping with the spirit of the Freedom Charter. It also points to the consequences of not fulfilling the expectations that citizens have of our democracy, especially in areas that touch on fundamental constitutional rights.

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**GETTING CLOSER:
GROWING RACIAL
TOLERANCE**

page 4

**PERCEPTIONS
OF SERVICE
DELIVERY**

page 7

**FIGHTING CORRUPTION IN
PUBLIC PROCUREMENT**

page 10