

CONFRONTING THE DIVIDE: Attitudes to inequality

By Ben Roberts

The extent to which South Africa's political and economic transformation has benefited the previously disadvantaged is subject to much debate. As one of the world's most inequitable societies, increasing attention has been devoted to measuring changes in South Africans' incomes and income inequality over the first decade of democracy.

Empirical evidence suggests that poverty may have increased, despite a resolute commitment by the government to address pervasive poverty and inequality, and the policy responses adopted to this end over the decade. Overall, inequality may also be stagnating due to the combined effects of worsening intra-racial inequality and only a marginal decline in inter-racial inequality.

The HSRC's 2003 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) contained a set of measures for exploring attitudes to inequality in a fairly direct manner. The results provide some insight into South Africans' attitudes towards the changed circumstances borne by the post-apartheid period.

The statement, "in South Africa incomes are too unequal", elicited responses reflecting a high level of dissatisfaction with the perceived level of income inequality in the country. An estimated 87% of respondents "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that incomes are too unequal. South Africans therefore appear to be generally intolerant of the level of inequality in the country.

This situation is felt more acutely by black Africans than by white respondents. And those identifying themselves as being vulnerable or "just getting by" are significantly more likely to express an aversion to income inequality than those that consider themselves "poor", or "better off".

There are a number of possible explanations for these negative views on inequality.

Attitudinal differences to inequality are certainly likely to reflect the enduring apartheid legacy of pronounced income and wealth inequality. But this negative attitude could also be attributed to a perceived growth in social inequalities over the decade, a sense of personal material loss for certain respondents – especially due to rising unemployment, and a perception that the post-apartheid transformation process has been unfair.

That those that are "just getting by" express the highest level of aversion to inequality is not altogether surprising. The kind of market reforms and trade liberalisation that South Africa has embarked on under the Growth,

Responses reflected a high level of dissatisfaction with the perceived level of income inequality

Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macro-economic strategy have been shown to not only create opportunities, but also new vulnerabilities, especially for the near poor or middle strata.

One would expect that the low levels of tolerance of inequality in society would produce an equally strong desire for governmental redistribution. And this appears to be the case, with 90% of respondents believing that government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for. Compared with other countries, this result is exceptionally high when related to the perceived aversion to inequality. While dissatisfaction with the level of income inequality in South Africa approximates that in more developed countries such as Great Britain, and is somewhat lower than that in Central and Eastern European countries, South Africans express the highest levels of agreement with regard to government's responsibility for social justice.

Despite the uniformly strong sentiment favouring the role of the state in meeting the inequality challenge, there appears to be less agreement on the preferred means of achieving these gains. While 90% of respondents believe that government has a responsibility to provide employment, only 66% believe that there should be preferential hiring and promotion of black South Africans.

This may be ascribed to the fact that most population groups support government-driven employment creation, ranging from 92% of Africans to 79% of Indians, but affirmative action receives mass support only from Africans. Among the other population groups, the level of support for such reform is less than half the national average.

There is even less support for black economic empowerment, with only 60% believing government should provide preferential contracts and tax breaks to black businesses. Attitudes to land reform reveal a similar trend, with sizeable support from black African respondents relative to other population groups. Relative to the "better off" group, those classifying themselves as "poor" generally express a more favourable attitude towards redistribution.

What are the possible reasons for this paradox: widespread aversion to inequality

and yet polarised levels of support for different forms of redistributive measures along race and class lines? One feasible explanation may be self-interest among South Africa's elites. Their concern about the income disparity in the country might stem from the perception that inequality breeds crime and poses a threat to property rights. Social consciousness among elites could also explain their concern about the economic divide, but research suggests that such social solidarity is poorly developed among most elites in South Africa – a situation complicated by the geographical, social, educational, economic, and psychological distances between elites and the impoverished masses.

Resistance to redistributive policies may arise from the fact that, unlike the poor, many elites have not benefited directly from such interventions. Poor delivery, corruption, nepotism and possibly a fear of a Zimbabwean-style redistribution of assets may also have tainted the redistribution process.

Understanding social attitudes may help policy-makers assess and navigate their political economy contexts in designing social policies for a fiscally sustainable social contract. The observed attitudinal differences with regard to the government's role in service provision and addressing inequality is significant. They may be particularly relevant to levels of political support for redistribution

or other types of public assistance.

Differences in attitudes about redistribution yield insights into which social policies are likely to be successful and politically sustainable in a particular context. Dismissing or ignoring public attitudes is likely to result in unsustainable programmes. Strategies for implementing reform must attempt to navigate the constraints posed by such attitudes,

and to recognise windows of opportunity.

The debate about redistribution in South Africa cannot be deferred any longer. Since we are one of the world's most unequal societies, redistribution on a far greater scale than has been attempted to date is required if the twin challenges of poverty and inequality are to be surmounted. Based on the SASAS results, it seems fairly certain that such redistributive efforts, if attempted, will be resisted. Government therefore needs to find innovative ways of minimising resistance to redistribution while improving the targeting of social spending and the gains from growth towards the lower end of the distribution. •

By Population Group, percentage that "agree" or "strongly agree" that...

BY RACE	SOUTH AFRICA	BLACK	COLOURED	INDIAN	WHITE
'In South Africa incomes are too unequal'	87	88	79	94	82
'Government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for'	90	92	88	85	84
'Government's duty is to provide employment'	90	92	87	79	83
'Government should ... redistribute land to black South Africans'	67	81	27	28	17
'There should be preferential hiring and promotion of Black African South Africans in employment'	66	80	17	31	15
'Government should ... give preferential contracts and tax breaks to black businesses'	60	72	20	26	13

Source: SASAS (2003)

By Self-Assessed Poverty Status, percentage that "agree" or "strongly agree" that...

BY POVERTY STATUS	SOUTH AFRICA	'BETTER OFF'	'JUST GETTING BY'	POOR
'In South Africa incomes are too unequal'	87	81	90	87
'Government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for'	90	89	93	93
'Government's duty is to provide employment'	90	87	94	93
'Government should ... redistribute land to black South Africans'	67	59	75	84
'There should be preferential hiring and promotion of Black African South Africans in employment'	66	54	75	81
'Government should ... give preferential contracts and tax breaks to black businesses'	60	50	72	74

NOTE: Self-assessed poverty status is derived from responses to the following question: 'Would you say that you and your family are wealthy, very comfortable, reasonably comfortable, just getting along, poor or very poor?'. The 'just getting by' category corresponds to the original 'just getting along' response. Finally, the 'better-off' category represents a collapsing together of those that identified themselves as 'wealthy', 'very comfortable' or 'reasonably comfortable'.

Source: SASAS (2003)

Egalitarian attitudes by country (percentage that "strongly agree" and "agree")

COUNTRY	DIFFERENCES IN INCOME IN YOUR COUNTRY ARE TOO LARGE	IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENT TO REDUCE DIFFERENCES IN INCOMES
Bulgaria	96.9	85.0
Russia	95.5	86.2
Portugal	96.0	89.9
Hungary	93.1	80.1
Slovenia	91.0	84.8
Slovakia	93.7	74.5
Latvia	96.7	78.7
Poland	89.1	84.9
Austria	86.2	72.5
Spain	89.3	79.3
Czech Republic	87.8	71.9
France	87.4	67.5
South Africa	86.6	90.1*
Great Britain	82.4	68.7
Germany	82.2	61.2
Norway	72.5	61.9
Sweden	71.1	59.5
Japan	69.2	52.6
Canada	70.6	47.5
New Zealand	73.2	49.4
Australia	70.9	49.7
USA	66.2	35.3
Average	92.3	80.7

Source: Redmond et al (2002) using ISSP 1999 data

* The phrasing between the SASAS and ISSP modules was somewhat different, which may partially explain the observed differentials in relation to government responsibility.

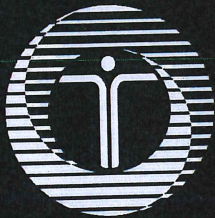
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