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South Africa Public Opinion Monitor: Causes of Poverty Survey Results

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The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across seven key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Policy Anticipation, Response and Evaluation theme.

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SOUTH AFRICA PUBLIC OPINION MONITOR: CAUSES OF POVERTY SURVEY RESULTS

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1 Scope and aims of the South Africa Public Opinion Monitor

The South Africa Public Opinion Monitor (SAPOM) is a longitudinal panel of 2,526 opinion leaders from across South Africa that aims to provide an ongoing monitor of opinions and perspectives on the economic and social development of South Africa, and on South Africa's place in the wider world. A particular sub-theme is South Africa's relations with other emerging and developing economies in sub-Saharan Africa and globally.

Reflecting the logistical difficulties and costs associated with surveys involving a representative sample of the South African population, the SAPOM specifically focuses on opinion leaders. Here, opinion leaders are defined as individuals who are actively engaged in economic and/or political issues in South Africa and are willing to participate in a continual panel, which means that they will be asked to respond to questions on an ongoing basis. A further rationale for the focus on opinion leaders is that they provide both an effective 'pulse' on opinions relating to economic and social issues in South Africa, and also act as key drivers of those opinions.

The SAPOM is an internet-based survey platform through which members are presented with short questionnaires every two months. Members are sent an email inviting them to participate in each survey and containing a link to the survey. After a period of seven days, members who have not responded are sent a reminder.

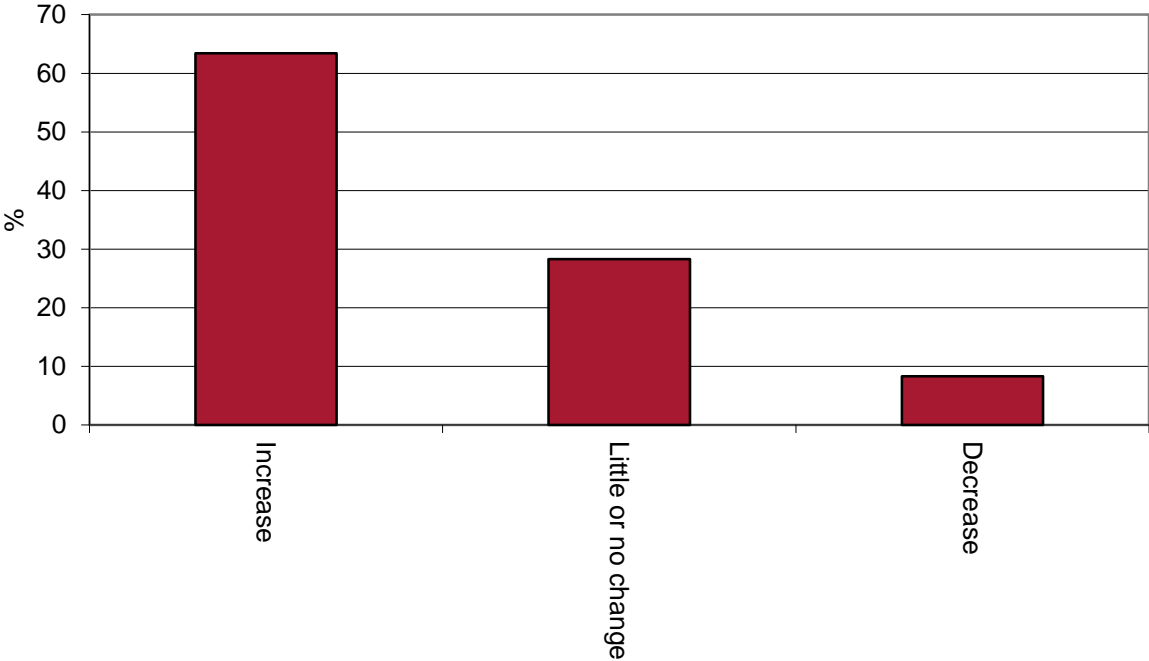
The current survey was undertaken in December 2013. Of the 2,526 members of the panel, 1,876 returned the fully completed questionnaire. A summary of the results is provided below.

The focus of the current survey was poverty in South Africa. Panel members were asked about current levels of poverty in South Africa, how they expected the level of poverty to change looking to the future, and what factors they considered to be the major determinants of poverty in the country. The same questions were put to panels in Brazil and India, enabling comparisons to be made with other BRICS countries.

2 Level of poverty in South Africa today

The survey started by asking opinion leaders how much poverty there is in South Africa today. Responses ranged from 10 to 82 per cent of the population, with an average of 60 per cent. Survey respondents were very pessimistic about rates of poverty in South Africa looking to the future. Only eight per cent were of the view that rates of poverty would decline over the next five to ten years, whilst over 60 per cent thought poverty would increase (Figure 2.1). Amongst those expecting poverty to increase in South Africa looking forwards, rates were expected to increase by almost 20 per cent on average.

Figure 2.1 Expected change over the next five to ten years in proportion of population that is poor



3 Causes of poverty

In order to identify the factors that opinion leaders consider to be the most critical causes of poverty, respondents were presented with a list of 25 potential causes compiled through a review of the research literature on antecedents of poverty. They were asked to indicate the importance of each of these factors in explaining why poverty exists in South Africa, Brazil and India today, on a five-point scale ranging from 'very unimportant' (1) to 'very important' (5). The resulting scores for the 25 factors were then categorised using Principal Components Analysis (PCA).¹ Specifically, PCA was applied to the pooled scores provided by survey respondents (n=4,653) from South Africa, Brazil and India so that common principal components were identified for the three countries.

A total of seven broad causes of poverty were identified as follows:²

- **Actions of the poor:** This principal component is closely related to items such as 'they have too many children', 'they are lazy' and 'financial mismanagement by the poor', suggesting it relates to beliefs that poverty results from the personal actions and behaviours of the poor themselves.
- **Fate or bad luck:** With close relations to items such as 'it is the will of God' and 'they have had bad luck', this suggests that poverty is outside the control of the poor and rather is the result of fate and/or bad luck.
- **Low social status:** Items such as 'exploited by the rich', 'inequality in Brazilian/Indian/South African society' and 'low social status' are most closely related to this principal component. This suggests that it relates to low status in society.
- **Lack of opportunities:** This principal component is most strongly related to items such as 'lack of economic opportunities for the poor', 'lack of education' and 'their parents were poor', suggesting lack of opportunities as a cause of poverty.
- **Government incapacity:** This principal component relates to the incapacity of government to help the poor with strong relations to items such as 'government corruption', 'government inefficiency or incompetence' and 'inadequate social welfare or assistance'.
- **Lack of societal concern about poverty:** The items 'lack of community spirit in Brazilian/Indian/South African society' and 'lack of concern about the poor within Brazilian/Indian/South African society' were heavily related to this principal component, suggesting it relates to a lack of societal concern about the poor.
- **Actions of rich countries:** This final principal component related to 'inadequate or inappropriate aid from rich countries' and 'exploited by rich countries', suggesting it is related to the actions of rich countries.

The loadings of each of the 25 items on these seven principal components are reported in Annex 1.

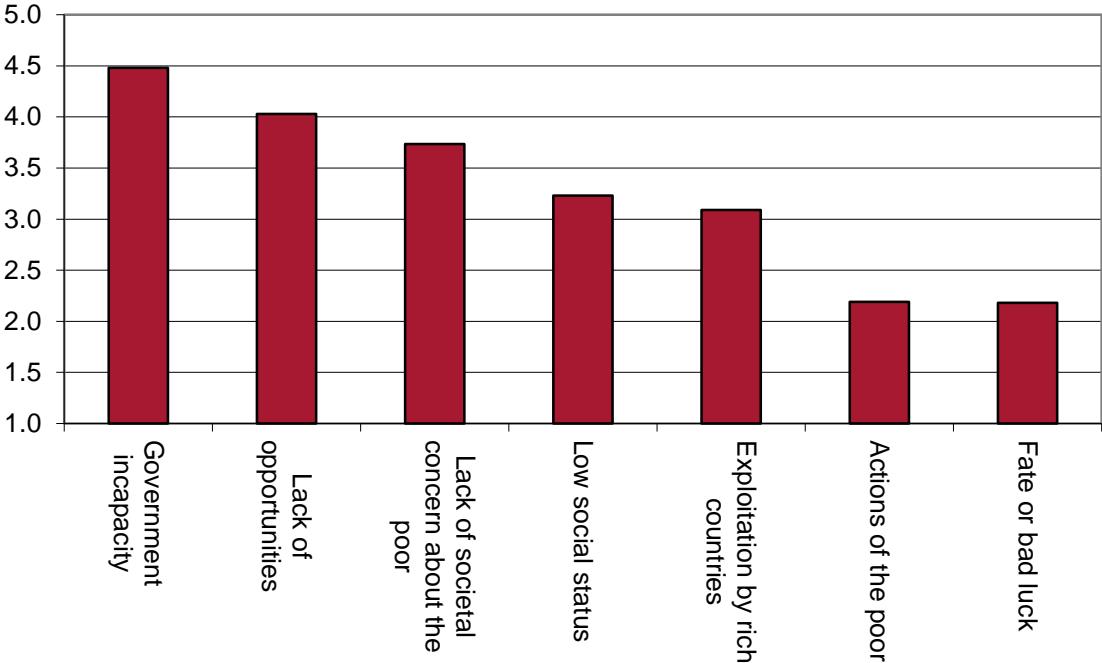
The average score for each of the seven identified causes of poverty is reported in Figure 3.1 below. Of the seven factors, personal responsibility and fate or bad luck had low average scores, indicating that these were considered relatively unimportant drivers of current levels

¹ PCA is a statistical technique that aims to identify the underlying patterns or structure in data. Thus, underlying the 25 items presented to respondents here, there are likely to be a smaller number of latent variables (or 'principal components') that are not immediately observable but with which the 25 items are related. PCA is a technique of identifying these latent variables and, in so doing, allowing better sense to be made of the scores provided by respondents.

² Seven principal components had eigenvalues exceeding one. These seven principal components accounted for 78 per cent of the variation in the data. Note that one of the 25 items did not load appreciably onto any of the seven eigenvalues and was excluded from the analysis.

of poverty in South Africa. Conversely, government incapacity was the single most important factor, followed by lack of economic opportunities.

Figure 3.1 Average score for causes of poverty scales

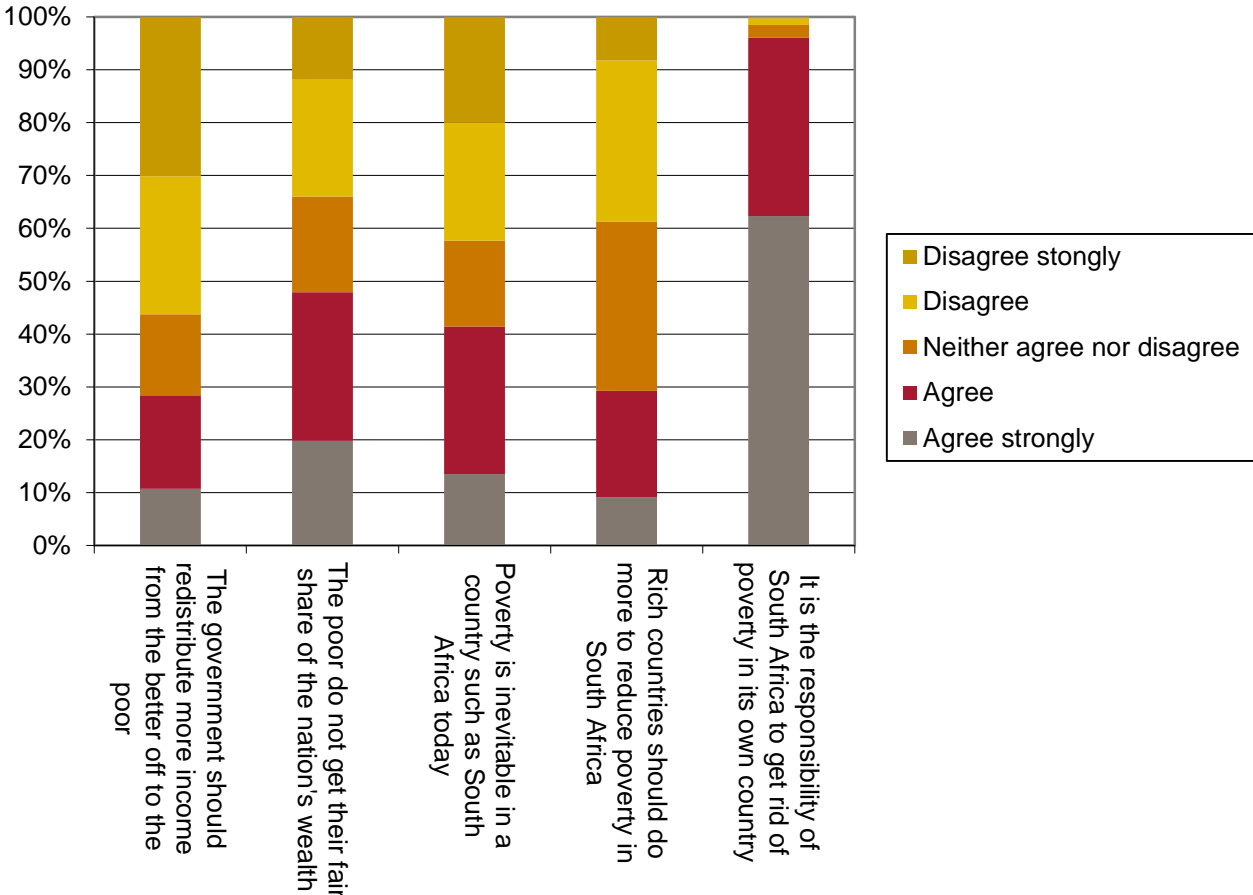


4 Views on alleviating poverty in South Africa today

The final part of the survey explored the views of opinion leaders on approaches to alleviating poverty in South Africa. Firstly, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements on a five-point scale ranging from 'disagree strongly' (1) to 'agree strongly' (5).

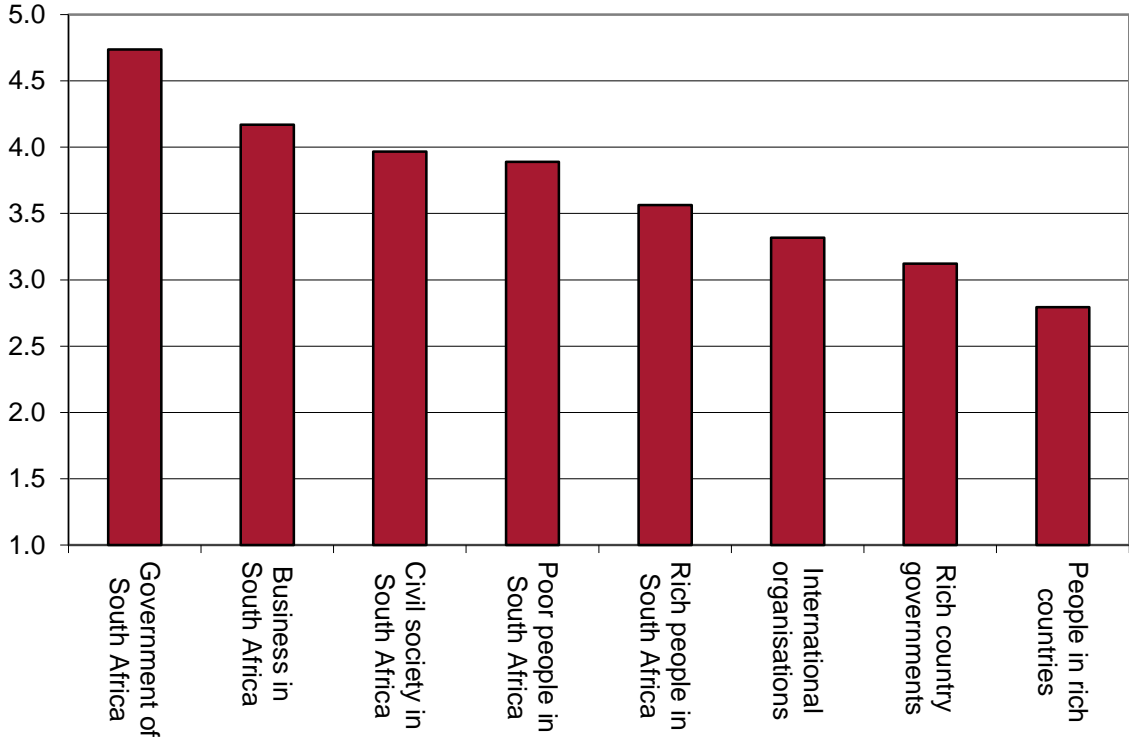
The results (Figure 4.1) suggest that opinion is split on whether high rates of poverty in South Africa are seen as inevitable or not given the socioeconomic situation in the country today. Thus, 41 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement 'poverty is inevitable in a country such as South Africa today', whilst 43 per cent disagreed with this statement. Opinion was also split on the case for income redistribution. Therefore, 56 per cent of respondents disagreed with the statement 'the government should redistribute more income from the better off to the poor', and only 48 per cent agreed that 'the poor do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth'. At the same time, 96 per cent of panel members who responded to the survey were of the view that it is South Africa's responsibility to get rid of poverty, whilst only 29 per cent agreed with the statement 'rich countries should do more to reduce poverty in South Africa'.

Figure 4.1 Level of agreement with statements on alleviating poverty in South Africa today



Finally, panel members were asked to score a range of actors in terms of their responsibility for reducing poverty in South Africa on a five-point scale from 'very little' (1) to 'very great' (5). By a significant margin, the government was judged to have the most responsibility for reducing poverty, followed by business and civil society. People in rich countries and the governments of rich countries were considered to have least responsibility. Interestingly, poor people in South Africa were considered to have more responsibility for reducing poverty than rich people.

Figure 4.2 Responsibility for reducing poverty in South Africa



5 Further information

If you would like any further information about the SAPOM and/or additional results, please do not hesitate to contact Spencer Henson (s.henson@ids.ac.uk). In addition, information about the SAPOM and similar panels in India and Brazil is available at www.ids.ac.uk/ipom.

Annex 1 Principal component loadings for seven causes of poverty scales

Determinant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Personal responsibility	Fate or bad luck	Low social status	Lack of opportunities	Government incapacity	Lack of societal concern about the poor	Exploitation by rich countries
They have chosen to be like this	0.637	0.280	-0.217	-0.568	-0.229	0.249	0.007
Financial mismanagement by the poor	0.671	-0.077	0.160	-0.037	0.143	0.500	-0.182
They are lazy	0.633	0.133	-0.387	-0.436	-0.074	0.268	0.316
They have too many children	0.818	0.201	-0.126	-0.066	0.099	-0.169	-0.133
Alcohol or drug abuse	0.831	0.037	0.174	0.122	-0.087	0.167	-0.002
They don't plan for the future	0.624	0.071	0.017	0.044	0.030	0.252	0.267
It is the will of God	0.112	0.768	-0.136	-0.005	-0.152	0.038	-0.027
They have had bad luck	0.036	0.822	-0.087	0.014	-0.125	-0.100	0.189
Sickness	0.204	0.643	-0.068	-0.241	0.190	0.082	0.276
Exploited by the rich	0.066	0.190	0.703	0.023	0.531	0.031	-0.083
Prejudice or discrimination against the poor	0.276	0.139	0.746	0.243	0.018	0.223	-0.277
Inequality in Brazilian/Indian/South African society	0.029	-0.149	0.815	0.195	-0.021	0.158	0.089
Low social status	0.114	0.472	0.693	-0.160	0.013	0.000	0.416
Lack of economic opportunities for the poor	-0.307	-0.063	0.141	0.734	0.345	0.109	0.063
Lack of education	0.018	0.176	-0.154	0.759	-0.059	0.322	0.035
Lack of employment	0.104	0.046	0.169	0.832	0.243	0.044	-0.136
Their parents were poor	0.231	0.128	0.170	0.648	-0.026	0.029	-0.004
Government corruption	0.258	-0.156	0.152	0.298	0.749	0.139	-0.411

Annex 1 (cont'd.)

Determinant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Personal responsibility	Fate or bad luck	Low social status	Lack of opportunities	Government incapacity	Lack of societal concern about the poor	Exploitation by rich countries
Government inefficiency or incompetence	0.079	-0.011	-0.028	0.164	0.867	0.076	0.092
Inadequate social welfare/assistance	-0.208	0.273	0.301	-0.081	0.676	0.276	-0.222
Lack of community spirit in Brazilian/Indian/South African society	0.267	0.083	0.107	0.094	0.034	0.750	-0.028
Lack of concern about the poor within Brazilian/Indian/South African society	-0.084	-0.048	0.301	0.152	0.295	0.673	0.043
Inadequate or inappropriate aid from rich countries	-0.007	-0.138	0.241	0.138	0.234	0.057	0.744
Exploited by rich countries	0.027	0.028	0.181	0.268	0.302	0.096	0.655



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