

Fostering an inclusive development agenda in South Africa: Citizen voices and government policy responses

Summary

The purpose of this policy brief is to identify the policy issues that are important to South Africans and to ascertain whether government is responsive to these challenges. Results from the South African Social Attitudes Survey series (2003 to 2014) are used to examine public opinion about the most important challenges facing the country as well as the public's satisfaction with government performance.

Responses in the successive surveys since 2003 have focused overwhelmingly on four related issues: unemployment, poverty, crime, and HIV and AIDS. The assessment of government's responsiveness in addressing these challenges reveals that South Africans are more satisfied with government's performance with regards to AIDS and HIV, and less satisfied with performance related to employment creation, crime and corruption. This policy brief therefore recommends that government focus more on these priority issues in making policy and in monitoring policy implementation.

In general, it is recommended that government engage more with the public at large to ensure that policy concerns of South Africans are

addressed in an inclusive, participatory and effective manner.

Background

The public agenda refers to the variety of issues, problems and events that the public as a whole are giving attention to at any particular time (Bevan et al. 2011). The assessment of public opinion about national priorities often provides insight into public preferences for policy. In political behaviour research, scholars often employ a survey question that asks about the 'most important problem' (MIP) facing the nation (Wlezien 2005). The concept of 'salience' is often used by voting-behaviour scholars to designate the importance individual voters attach to different issues when evaluating political candidates. The proponents of these research perspectives argue that voters often make their voting decisions based solely on issues which dominate election campaigns (Graefe & Armstrong 2012). Government is therefore guided to consider the most important challenges listed by ordinary South Africans when developing policy to improve citizens' quality of life. According to the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME 2013), citizens' experiences and opinions must be included in government's monitoring system. Furthermore, the need to be responsive

to citizens' opinions is well established in law and policy. For example, 'Section 195 (1) (e) of the Constitution states that people's needs must be responded to ... and (f) that public administration must be accountable' (DPME 2013).

Data

To gain an appreciation of what ordinary South Africans think about the problems facing them, we have 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. Designed as a time series, the SASAS is increasingly providing a unique, long-term account of the speed and direction of change in underlying public values in contemporary South Africa.

One of the core themes that has featured in each round of the survey series relates to democracy, governance and politics. A version of the 'most important problem' indicator has been included as a standard part of this thematic focus, with the specific form of the question being, '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. In addition, the survey has regularly fielded questions on public evaluations of government performance in key policy areas. Comparing public priorities with the government policy agenda as represented by the National Development Plan (NDP), as well as public evaluations of state performance, we aimed to establish the perceived responsiveness of government policy to the preferences of citizens, and to evaluate how this relationship has changed over the course of the last decade. Use was made of the first 11 rounds of the SASAS series, covering 2003 to 2014.

The public agenda: 2003 to 2014

A review of the 2003–2014 SASAS data shows that certain priorities have remained constant (e.g. unemployment) while others have rapidly jumped up the priority list (e.g. corruption). Responses in the successive surveys since 2003 have focused overwhelmingly on four related issues: unemployment, crime and safety, HIV and AIDS, and poverty (see Table 1). Findings from the data review include:

- Throughout the decade, *unemployment* has consistently featured as the most commonly mentioned challenge facing the country, being referred to on average

by three-quarters of South African adults, and fluctuating in a narrow range between 69% and 82%. It is also the most important challenge by a considerable margin: 28 percentage points higher on average than the second most-cited issue.

- Between 2003 and 2009, concern over *crime and safety* competed with *HIV and AIDS* in terms of levels of public attention. During this period close to half the adult population cited these issues as national priorities. However, since 2009, concern over crime and safety has remained at a similar threshold, while the share mentioning HIV and AIDS as a major priority has exhibited a dramatic decline, from 51% in 2008 to 22% in late 2014.
- *Poverty*, which relates to social welfare and justice, has fluctuated over the decade. It decreased initially between 2004 and 2007, but was rated as a higher priority from 2008 to 2010 as the effects of the global economic crisis were hardest felt. Since 2011, there has been a reduced tendency to mention poverty as a problem. Public attention to poverty therefore tends to mirror macroeconomic cycles.
- Apart from HIV and AIDS, the most pronounced change in the set of items forming the public agenda relates to *corruption*. South Africans

are clearly concerned about recent developments in this regard. In 2003, only 9% mentioned corruption as an important problem, but this percentage progressively rose to a high of 28% by 2012. In 2014, 24% mentioned corruption as a concern. This makes it the fourth highest-ranked item by the public, ahead of HIV and AIDS.

- Attention to issues of *service delivery* has experienced ebbs and flows over the last 11 years, although concern did increase around the 2006 and 2011 municipal elections. The increasing reference to service delivery matters in the last couple of years means that almost a tenth more citizens referred to it in 2014 relative to 2003. Barely a tenth refers to *housing or education* issues, with limited variation over time.
- Worries about general *economic and financial issues* were reported by 7% of South Africans in 2014, which, taken together with unemployment, re-emphasises the dominant position of macroeconomic issues in the public agenda.
- After two decades of democracy, *racism* is still considered a major challenge but is mentioned on average by only 5% of adults. The remaining problems (not displayed in Table 1) were cited by less than 5% of South Africans, and include issues

Table 1: Trends in top-ranked most important problems, 2003–2014 (% , ranked by mean score)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Mean	Change 2003–14
Unemployment	78	80	82	72	72	70	74	69	77	76	76	74	75	-5
Crime and safety	47	48	42	48	50	47	47	45	43	48	50	45	47	-1
HIV and AIDS	49	50	46	47	50	51	46	39	47	31	23	22	42	-27
Poverty	38	39	36	31	30	41	42	40	27	33	32	31	35	-7
Corruption	9	11	12	13	15	14	18	19	26	28	25	24	18	+15
Service provision/delivery	12	11	21	19	16	13	15	19	15	17	22	20	16	+8
Affordable housing	13	13	14	14	12	10	9	10	9	9	11	7	11	-5
Education	9	8	9	11	8	8	9	15	12	13	11	15	11	+6
Economic & financial issues	5	5	5	5	6	8	8	5	5	6	6	7	6	+2
Racism	5	4	3	4	5	5	4	4	7	5	5	5	5	0

Source: HSRC SASAS, 2003–2014

Note: The mean score is the average share of the adult population mentioning the different items over the decade.

such as xenophobia, human rights, other labour and employment issues, as well as the environment.

Government responsiveness

How responsive is the government policy agenda to public preferences? To assess this, two key documents prepared by the National Planning Commission (NPC), based in the Office of the Presidency, were consulted. The first is the Diagnostic Overview report of the NDP (NPC 2011a), which details the achievements and shortcomings of the ANC government since 1994. The second document is the National Development Plan – Vision 2030 (NPC 2011b), which articulates a vision for South Africa to 2030, and provides an overarching framework for further planning and delivery by actors from every segment of society.

The Diagnostic Overview highlights nine priority challenges to which policy-related interventions need to respond in the coming decades: unemployment; the quality of education; poorly located and maintained infrastructure; spatial patterns of deprivation; a high burden of disease coupled with a weak public health system; uneven and poor-quality public services; widespread corruption; and societal divisions and tensions. It is readily apparent that there is a reasonable degree of congruence between these priorities and those forming the public agenda, with perhaps the main omission being crime and safety.

The National Development Plan – Vision 2030 outlines ways of addressing these key challenges and thus realising the long-term vision for the country. The key focus of the vision is to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality. There is strong agreement between highly salient items in the public agenda and the focus areas identified by the NDP as necessary to achieve the long-term vision:

- Creating jobs and livelihoods.
- Expanding infrastructure.

- Transitioning to a low-carbon economy.
- Developing urban and rural spaces.
- Improving education and training.
- Providing quality healthcare.
- Building a capable state.
- Fighting corruption and enhancing accountability.
- Transforming society and uniting the nation.

The long-term planning suggested by the NDP is not new to South Africa, with, for example, the ANC's poverty-reduction efforts starting well before 1994 (Magasela 2006). Indeed, government has already begun to align the long-term plans of departments with the NDP and to identify areas where policy change is required (Zarenda 2013). Another important aspect in the implementation process of the NDP is how government engages with all sectors of society.

The public agenda and perceived government performance

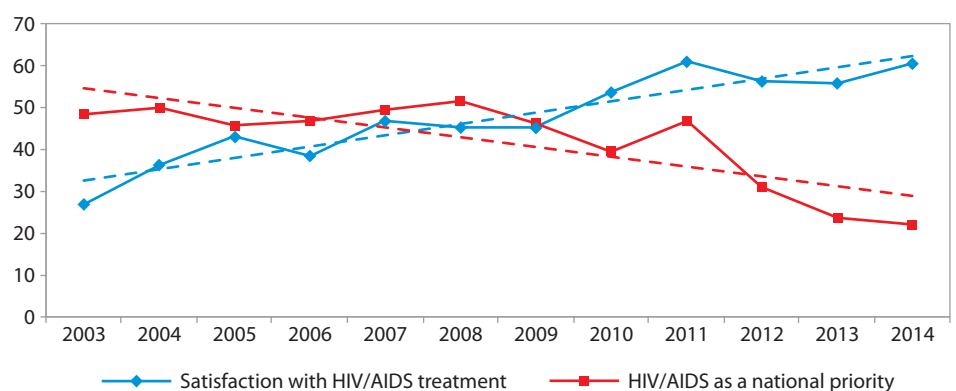
Citizens care about the outcomes of government policy, and are likely to pay particular attention to government performance in relation to issues that feature prominently in the public agenda. If the public are not aware of and responsive to efforts by the state, policy-makers would have little incentive to take account of citizens' priorities and preferences in crafting

policies (Soroka & Wleziem 2010). A responsive public would therefore be expected to adjust their preferences in response to the performance of policy-makers. So if demonstrable gains are made in a particular social sector, we would anticipate public evaluations of outcomes in that sector to improve and for it to receive less emphasis on the public agenda.

To assess public responsiveness, we examined SASAS 2003–2014 trends in government performance evaluations in relation to HIV and AIDS, crime and safety, and job creation. Specifically, the SASAS asked citizens to indicate their level of satisfaction with government performance in relation to specific policy issues (e.g. job creation). We then compared these responses to the ranking of these issues as priorities on the public agenda over time. The results provide encouraging evidence that the South African public are responsive to policy performance, which is a healthy sign for representative democracy in the country.

For example, the share of South Africans expressing satisfaction with government efforts at providing treatment for HIV and AIDS more than doubled between 2003 and 2014 (rising from 27% to 61%). Over the same period, concern about HIV and AIDS as a major problem has fallen significantly (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: HIV and AIDS treatment: Percentage of surveyed South Africans listing it as a most important problem compared with the percentage expressing satisfaction with government performance



South African citizens seem to be responding favourably to the achievements of government in promoting long and healthy lives. Over the last decade, there has been a rapid roll-out of antiretroviral therapy (ART), with the number of patients receiving ART rising from 47 500 to over 2 million between 2004 and 2012. This has had a major impact on the survival of people living with HIV. The successful Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) programme has also seen decreased levels of paediatric HIV infection via vertical transmission (Simbayi et al. 2014).

We find similar correspondence between performance evaluations and issue priorities in relation to crime and unemployment. SASAS 2003–2014 results reveal that satisfaction with crime-reduction efforts has remained very low over the decade, averaging 21% between 2003 and 2014, while crime and safety remained firmly among the top three priorities on the public agenda over the same period. Between 2009 and 2011, satisfaction with crime reduction improved modestly and there was a parallel decline in the share citing crime and safety as a priority issue. In both cases the situation reversed in the aftermath of the 2012 Marikana miners' strike (in which 34 miners were shot by police during a labour dispute) and a growing number of reported incidents of police brutality.

On average only 10% voiced satisfaction with government's job-creation efforts over the SASAS 2003–2014 period, with only nominal fluctuations between 7% and 14% during the decade. As previously described, unemployment has consistently been ranked by the public as the most important challenge facing the country, mentioned by three-quarters (75%) of all adult South Africans over the last 10 years. Again, there were only minor variations in the emphasis attached to unemployment over the

interval, reinforcing the perspective that citizens' evaluations of government performance are linked to how they prioritise their major concerns.

Recommendations

Key role-players such as government and politicians from all political parties will have to be innovative to ensure that the interests of ordinary South Africans are addressed and that these citizens are able to experience real improvements in their quality of life. Policy recommendations include:

- The South African government should continue to focus on the key policy areas outlined in the NDP.
- Government must improve its monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and reporting on the progress of each policy area. The DPME needs to be the key driver in this process since it was established on the principle that the systematic use of M&E evidence in policy, planning and implementation is essential for continuous performance improvement.
- While government should be acknowledged for putting in place the internal structures of government's performance-monitoring systems, it does not adequately incorporate citizens' opinions and experiences in its intervention or improvement programmes. What is needed is broad-based public consultation through best-practice models.
- Regular evaluation of citizen-government monitoring instruments and approaches is necessary to enhance the impact and effectiveness of intervention programmes. Instruments such as citizen report cards, public hearings, social audits, etc., must be evaluated, revised and implemented according to clear guidelines.
- National, provincial and local government must work together to

strengthen public participation in the M&E process.

- In general, government, politicians, as well as community, private-sector and other non-governmental leaders must work out definitive strategies to address the policy areas of concern to citizens, and to improve the M&E and reporting on the progress of each policy area.

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