

No evidence of a dependency culture in South Africa

A worrying discourse has begun to infiltrate public opinion on social security in South Africa in recent years, particularly prevalent in debates about the future of social grants, linking reliance on social grants with the emergence of a 'dependency culture'. But, say MICHAEL NOBLE and PHAKAMA NTSHONGWANA, a study has shown that there is no evidence that social grants generate a culture of dependency.

THE ROOTS OF THIS DEBATE go back many centuries to notions of the 'undeserving poor' entrenched in pre-welfare state Britain. However, the more recent roots are to be found in neo-liberal thought which emerged in the 1980s, particularly in the US, spreading to any state which offers cash transfers as part of its anti-poverty armoury and which has concerns that expenditure on state transfers is becoming a strain on the national fiscus.

It is a disingenuous thesis. Its starting point is that the poor are responsible for their own poverty and are inherently indolent, preferring to rely on state support than entering the labour market. It ignores the role social grants can play in restoring dignity to the unemployed and in helping place the unemployed in a better position to seek employment. Worst of all it flies in the face of evidence that the unemployed, far from being feckless, have a strong attachment to the labour market, and would much prefer the opportunity to support themselves through paid work if the opportunity presents itself.

Though the spectre of the 'dependency culture' is most commonly raised by right-wing opponents of states espousing social democratic values in the northern hemisphere, its proponents have found sympathetic ears in South Africa. Often we hear it said that in South Africa social grants foster dependency and that people should be given a 'hand-up' not a 'hand-out'.

The view is often taken that a social safety net in the form of grants is anti-development, and is even antipathetic to home-grown anti-poverty solutions. This is far from the truth – to be opposed to social grants for the unemployed, is to be aligned with western neo-liberals found in anglo-saxon states such as the US and to a lesser degree the UK.

Research from developed countries which do provide a social security safety net has shown no evidence of a dependency culture. But what about the situation in South Africa?

Though South Africa's social grant system is becoming more comprehensive due to the expansion of the Child Support Grant (CSG), a big hole in the social safety net remains in the form of lack of support for healthy, unemployed people of working age. Denied unemployment insurance, because most of them have never been formally employed, there are persuasive arguments for providing a social grant for this group as it would be an important plank of any anti-poverty strategy and serve as a bridge until sufficient employment opportunities became available.

However, issues of affordability notwithstanding, those opposed to extending the social grant system may still raise the arguments of 'dependency' as one of the reasons not to. The Centre for the Analysis of South African Social Policy (CASASP) at the University of Oxford and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) consequently collaborated on research to look



for evidence for the existence of a 'dependency culture' within South Africa.

Using a specially designed module in the HSRC's South African Social Attitudes Survey 2006, some hard facts emerge which demonstrate a very positive orientation of both the unemployed and existing social grant recipients towards work; general support for an extension to the social security system to provide support for the unemployed; and, importantly, no evidence that social grants generate a culture of dependency.



In the first instance we examined the extent to which paid work conferred dignity on those in employment. In response to the statement 'A person has to have a job to have dignity', two-thirds of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

We might expect that those without jobs could have adapted to their circumstances and might hold differing views about the importance of work. However, when asked to comment on the proposition that 'I feel alright about being out of work because so

many other people are out of work too', those not in paid work overwhelmingly disagreed.

Interestingly poor people appeared to demonstrate a greater attachment to the labour market than non-poor people: 82% of poor people stated that it was important to hang on to a job even if they didn't like it. And relatively few poor people would leave a job they didn't like unless they had another job to go to. Overall, two-thirds of respondents disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement 'If I did not like a job, I would leave, even if there were no other job to go to'.

Over 70% of the population considered work to be the 'normal thing to do' and 66% thought work helped overcome feelings of isolation. This social integration role of work was stressed most by black Africans, amongst whom nearly 69% agreed or strongly agreed that work gave them a sense of belonging to the community compared to only 57% of white respondents.

When asked what was the greatest obstacle to finding jobs, around 60% cited 'no/few jobs available'. Although this is a 'demand side' factor which will require macro-economic policy shifts to take effect, some of the other reasons cited are 'supply side' and give pointers to other possible interventions. e.g. 21% gave 'not enough qualifications' and 12% gave 'not enough relevant experience' as reasons for not getting a job. The data suggest that there was a great willingness to train to get the necessary skills. Looking at just the unemployed population, over 80% of black African respondents said that they would be very or quite willing to move to find work, compared to around 50% of other unemployed respondents.

We found widespread support for extending the cover of the social assistance scheme to unemployed people: 84% of poor people agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that 'People who can't get work deserve help in the form of social grants'. Support was weakest among the 'non poor' (66%) but still there was a clear majority in favour, and 79% of unemployed respondents supported the proposition.

There was also general agreement about the need for government to spend more money on social grants for the poor even if it means higher taxes: just under 72% of respondents whose households are currently receiving grants agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition, compared to almost 63% of

those in work and almost 60% of the 'non poor' group.

In order to explore general attitudes to social grants we asked all respondents about their view of whether claimants were 'deserving'. In response to the statement: 'Most people on social grants desperately need the help', poor and non poor people, all population groups, and both those working and not working, overwhelmingly supported this view.

There has been some speculation that the CSG discourages work seeking among the recipients, even though this grant is for children and is set at R200 per month. We asked respondents whether the CSG is too high and discourages job seeking – only 13% of the 'poor' and 17% of the 'non poor' either agreed or strongly agreed. On the other hand 71% of all respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed, ranging from 77% ('poor') to 65% ('non poor'). The responses of those whose households were in receipt of CSG were not significantly different from households where no CSG was in payment.

We asked unemployed respondents whether they consider themselves better off claiming grants than working: three-quarters rejected the assertion that it is not worth them working. These data, therefore, provide little evidence of the existence of a 'dependency culture' among the workless.

These research findings refute the notion of a dependency culture amongst South Africans who live in households that receive grants. There was neither support for the proposition that receipt of CSG discourages people from finding work nor that people felt better off claiming grants than working. It was evident that the attitudes of the poor and those receiving grants were very similar to those of other respondents, and all respondents demonstrated a strong commitment to work. The most important factors in reducing people's chances of finding employment were perceived to be linked to the structural conditions of the labour market and the wider economy rather than the motivational characteristics of the unemployed and the arrangements of the grant system. ●

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