POVERTY IN SOUTH AFRICA: Extent of access to food and income

The majority of South Africans still perceived themselves as lacking enough food and income to meet all their household needs, according to information collected by the HSRC’s annual South African Social Attitudes Survey (SAFAS) 2003, 2004 and 2005, and processed by YUL DEREK DAVIDS.

POVERTY IS MULTI-DIMENSIONAL and cannot be reduced to a single definition. Some researchers, especially in developing countries, have attempted to broaden the concept of poverty to include aspects of well-being and inequality which reflect the lived experience of being poor more realistically.

Two such items focus on assessing people’s access to enough food and income to cater for all their household needs. And although these are by no means a comprehensive measure of poverty, they do measure some aspects of people's ability to secure basic necessities.

The surveys asked citizens whether they agree that ‘my household is able to get enough food for its needs’. A comparison of the SAFAS surveys reveals that the white respondents consistently scored much better than Indian, coloured and black respondents in securing enough food for their household needs (Figure 1). The 2005 survey found that 91.3% of the white respondents agree with the statement, whereas 85.9% of Indians, 65.2% of coloureds and 48.5% of blacks agreed. It is also evident that the 2004 survey respondents were the least optimistic about whether they get enough food for their household needs.

However, the views of the coloured respondents in the 2004 survey were better than in the 2003 survey. When the data is disaggregated by residential area, the results of the SAFAS survey over three years indicate that respondents in urban formal areas are the most likely group to have enough food for their household needs, and the urban informal respondents are more likely to secure enough food for their households needs.

Figure 2 shows that in general the respondents from the informal and tribal areas were the least successful in securing enough food compared to their counterparts in the urban informal and rural areas. It is only in the 2003 survey that the respondents in tribal areas recorded a slightly better score than the respondents in the rural formal areas.

On the question of household income and whether it was enough for their needs, 74.0% of the white respondents in the 2005 survey agreed with the statement, compared to 71.5% of the Indian, 39.3% of the coloured, and 34.4% of the black respondents. The results are consistent over the three surveys, with a slight decrease from 2003 to 2004, but with the exception of coloured people, who registered an increase in that year and a gradual increase from 2003 to 2005.

Indians, on the other hand, had a much more positive outlook, with more respondents agreeing in 2005 than in 2004 that they have enough income for their household needs. Both black (34.4%) and coloured (39.3%) respondents perceived access to enough income for their household needs negatively in the 2005 survey. White (74%) and Indian (71.5%) respondents, on the other hand, perceived access to income much more positively.

As with the answers to questions on household food (Figure 3), respondents in the formal areas are much more positive than their counterparts in the informal areas in securing enough income for their household needs. It is also evident that respondents residing in urban formal areas are much better off than rural informal areas. The results from the tribal and urban informal areas are mixed and vary from the 2003 to 2005 surveys.

Overall the results of the SAFAS surveys indicate that, compared to the other racial groups in South Africa, black people are still way behind in terms of access to enough food as well as income for their household needs.

These results concur with those of Adato, Carter and May (2004) which suggested that inequality and poverty have further deepened in post-apartheid South Africa, and that stark differences still exist between black and white South Africans. Based on the Ten Years of Democracy Survey, Hamel, Brodie and Morin (2005) further demonstrated that poverty in South Africa is divided along racial lines and that black people are more frequently going without basic services and necessities than people in white, coloured and Indian communities.

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